THE EGYPTIAN THEATRE

Plays and Playwrights

Nehad Selaiha

For Sarah,

my guardian angel and all the playwrights and wonderful theatre artists who have given us both so much pleasure over the years

PREFACE

This is one of a series of books which attempt to cover various aspects of the modern Egyptian theatre. Here, the reader will meet different generations of writers who helped to shape and define the course of modern Egyptian drama from the 1950s onwards.

Whatever description or analysis of their work, and any background information or insights the book offers, are given in the context of discussions of performances which took place during the past twelve years (1991-2003). This is because most of the material included here originally appeared in the form of articles or extended theatre reviews in *Al-Ahram Weekly*. My reasons for not sifting it out and rekneading it into a straightforward historical narrative are multiple:

First and foremost, it would have taken years to accomplish the task – something I cannot afford, not only because as one nears sixty one feels that "play time" is running out and each new day seems like the last minute before the whistle goes, with no hope of "extra time", but also because there is so much theatre going on all the time that one cannot afford, indeed, does not want to miss out on. The flow does not permit a pause, unless you quit swimming and climb up on the shore.

Secondly, it seemed to me that if I reworked the material into a historical account of dramatists in Egypt, or the development of drama, something valuable would be lost — the glow of the moment of exposure to drama in action, in live performance, when the word becomes flesh.

It seemed to me that leaving the material as it is, with very few alterations, and arranging it in a kind of order that would provide

chronological links and a degree of historical coherence was the best procedure. I felt this way I could get the best of both worlds: give the book a historical frame, however sketchy, while making sure that drama is never separated from live performance and treated in isolation as literary text — a division I find utterly false and thoroughly damaging to both. I like to think that, at every step, this book will reveal the interplay of drama and live theatre, text and performance, author and spectator, the past of the text and its manifestation at a particular moment in history, and how both invariably manage to engage this moment in lively, pertinent dialogue.

In this respect, a positive side-effect is that the reader is allowed to rub shoulders with many of the great directors and performers who brought Egyptian drama to life on the boards and get a glimpse not only of their artistic methods and ideological predilections, but also of the theatrical conventions, socio-economic conditions and political contexts within which they work.

An inevitable corollary of this design, however, was that some significant playwrights had to be omitted (something I hope to make up for in a future English publication since I have already written about them extensively in Arabic), while the space could not be shared out equally among those included. Some, you will find, are represented by only one play while others are introduced by as many as five. It is an unfortunate drawback which could not be helped and should not be taken to imply value judgement as to quality or importance on my part. If it is indicative of anything, it is of the trend of taste in theatre prevalent among producers, directors and audiences in the period the book covers. To further emphasize this, I have arranged the writers in

Part I in chronological order, according to dates of birth, while in part II, where years of birth coincide in many cases, the names were listed alphabetically.

Nehad Selaiha

Cairo,

August 2003

Contents

PART I

The First Wave

Tawfiq El-Hakim

1898-1987

By Way of an Introduction: The Man and the Mask*

For a man who professed to live the life of a recluse and prescribed "the ivory tower" as the ideal haven for artists, Tawfiq El-Hakim has done extremely well publicity-wise. Few laymen may have read his books, or may know only the few that were made into films or shown on TV or the stage. Nevertheless, his is a household name and his face, or rather, faceless media-image, is as familiar as that of a film star or popular cartoon figure.

A few years ago I was introducing a drama class to semiotics. To demonstrate to them that a sign acquired a definite meaning only when it was combined with others in a pattern, I chalked on the board a walking stick. It suggested several meanings. But when I added to the stick a bowler hat, they all chorused "Charlie Chaplin!" When I wiped out the bowler hat and replaced it with a floppy beret, they hailed this simple combination of commonplace objects as Tawfiq El-Hakim.

It struck me that our image of El-Hakim as the bereted, mustachioed and shabbily-attired intellectual hermit carrying a stick was an artificial construction, as elaborate as Chaplin's cinematic caricature of the vagrant. It was a theatrical mask. Indeed, this expert in the art of self-promotion surpassed Chaplin in some respects: he needed no props, no sets and no supporting actors – that is, apart from his famous talking donkey, who made his debut in a silent part in the *Diary of a Country Magistrate* (1937) then jumped to the lead in two books that

* 11 July 1991.

bore his name, *My Donkey Said To Me* (1938) and *El-Hakim's Donkey* (1940).

El-Hakim's mask, too, was more complex and resilient. When its familiar lines deepened over the years, and its newness wore off, fresh lines appeared to add new character facets. By the end of his life, El-Hakim's assiduously cultivated public persona was a veritable gallery of characters from the comic repertoire. It combined the Olympian recluse, the witty clown, the misanthrope, the miser, the doddering, kindly patriarch, the scowling misogynist and the buoyant male chauvinist pig who values nothing in a woman other than her meat and potato casseroles.

Curiously, this most obviously theatrical of public personalities managed to take in whole generations of critics and scholars. They listened to him reverently and believed his every word. When he pompously declared that he never intended his plays for the stage but, rather, for a "theatre of the mind", they jubilantly heralded the birth of a new dramatic genre and christened it "intellectual theatre". What a hoax. The man was simply and rather obtusely defending himself, brazening out the charge, not altogether unwarranted, that his plays sometimes lacked life and verve and sounded more like elaborate debates than dramas. But the ruse worked, and eventually congealed and solidified into a vexing fact of "critical" life. The obfuscating and rather off-putting epithet "intellectual" has since clung to El-Hakim's theatre like a leech, sucking away its vitality and humour and bleeding one production after another dry. The spook he conjured up to awe the critics has also daunted actors and directors and frightened away many a potential audience.

That El-Hakim himself was more theatrical than any of his stage characters and infinitely more witty, vivid and interesting, may account for the fact that since his death directors have preferred to stage plays about him rather than revive his own.

After all, he was his own best dramatic creation. A few years ago, he starred in a musical at the Balloon Theatre and was impersonated by the great actor and director Sa'd Ardash. More recently, director Abdel-Sattar El-Khodari has dragged him once more to the boards and the limelight at the behest of playwright Ahmed Itman (who heads the department of classical languages at Cairo University) to bemoan the erosion of classical values in today's life and art and, naturally, inveigh against the boulevard theatre the real El-Hakim knew and loved so well and, perhaps, secretly preferred to the literary classical theatre he publicly championed. After all, that was where he got his early apprenticeship and learnt to love the theatre. Didn't he spend his early youth fraternizing with the Okasha brothers and their commercial troupe in the music halls of Emadeddin before he was dragged away to Paris and the Classics?

Dr. Itman did his best to defend the Greeks and their theatre, using El-Hakim's mask as his mouthpiece. But he committed the singular error of mistaking the mask for the man. Like many candid scholars before him and many an earnest disciple of the master, he swallowed the bait. But the inherent theatricality of the mask proved irrepressible and no amount of structural gimmickry could circumvent it.

The formula of the "play-within-the-play" availed nothing, since we could no more believe in the reality of the El-Hakim projected on the stage than in the reality of the actors he was supposed to be watching.

And although Tawfiq Abdel-Latif, in the title role, strove hard to invest the mask with a sense of reality, its theatricality defeated him, infecting everything, including his acting, and transformed the play into a travesty of itself.

The sudden arrival of Aristophanes on the scene didn't help matters. As he trundled down a long staircase at the back reaching up to heaven, looking like an out-size angel minus the wings, the play teetered on the edge of farce. He was presumably called in to bolster El-Hakim's (Itman's) plea for a "serious, respectable" theatre. His short barks and startling acerbic eruptions, however, did more damage than good. He looked and sounded as if he had just walked out of a commercial farce. One wondered why he departed angrily at the end, dragging El-Hakim with him to heaven, when the actors in the "play within the play" suddenly gave up acting Dr. Itman's parody of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazousae (Women in Parliament)* and burst into belly-dancing. It looked as if he would have been quite at home doing that.

Dr. Itman's message may not have got through. But it was certainly a hilarious and very entertaining evening.

Keeping it Simple:*

O, Tree-Climber

Avant-garde theatres are notorious for making the simplest of texts seem unfathomably deep, impenetrably complex or bafflingly convoluted. In Egypt, however, the state-funded avant-garde theatre, El-Tali'a, has always manifested a definite bias for simplicity. From birth, it seemed to have been infected with the debilitating virus of facile political interpretation. There, texts are rarely, if ever, ransacked for their hidden meanings, ambivalences, paradoxes or metaphoric potential, or even used as a vehicle for projecting some original, imaginative reading of reality. Any honest investigation of ideology, the cultural heritage, or the human condition seems out of the question; all problematic issues are, as a rule, summarily axed or blithely eschewed. Upon arrival, texts, old or new, and of whatever denomintion, are routinely rushed to some mysterious dramaturgical operating theatre where they undergo a serious, extensive "simplification surgery". From there, they emerge as inert, skeletal frames, shorn of life and significance. Next comes the grotesque stage of dressing these ghostly entities in the most fashionable political slogans of the day preparatory to parading them on stage.

This savage policy of "simplification" and "dehumanization" has been diligently pursued, cultivated and refined by El-Tali'a over the years and has given us a long string of insipid, vacuous and dangerously propagandist shows. There have been exceptions of course, but extremely few and far between. When Samir El-Asfouri

* 15 August 1996.

was artistic and executive director of the company, there were times – very brief and erratic spells — when he would shake off his deep-seated gloom and nihilistic apathy and come up with an astonishingly stirring and provocative *spectacle*. Soon enough, however, he would scurry back to his protective shell of cynicism, sink into lethargic indifference, and sluggishly watch the younger generation merrily blunder on.

The present director of the theatre, Mahmoud El-Alfi, however, is a kindly, jovial man who ardently believes in the virtues of simplicity. For this year's experimental festival (which starts on 1 September) he commissioned a young dramaturge to prepare a simplified version of Tawfiq El-Hakim's *O, Tree-Climber* (originally staged at the pocket theatre by Sa'd Ardash in 1964) and Sayed Mohamed Ali has dutifully obliged, making sure that his adaptation can accommodate as many songs and dances as the director, Ashraf El-Nu'mani, can squeeze in. It was the same treatment administered to Fernando Arrabal's *Le Labyrinthe* last year at the same venue, and I remember thinking at the time how the poor author must be writhing (indeed, spinning) in his grave. Having watched *O, Tree-Climber* I have come to the conclusion that for the next thirty days at least, Tawfiq El-Hakim will be indulging in a similar exercise.

On the opening night I met the adaptor who tried to enlist my sympathies beforehand by explaining to me that his version was what El-Hakim really had in mind but failed to achieve. "He (El-Hakim) had wanted to write an absurd drama," he said, but ended up producing "a straight text with nothing absurd about it." I wondered if we were talking about the same play. I told him: a) that I was not, in principle, against adapting old texts for new 'experimental' uses — it is done all

over the world; b) that nobody should presume to say what was in El-Hakim's mind when he wrote the text; c) that I liked the play very much and did not care a pin about its dramatic provenance — absurd or otherwise; and d) that I was there to enjoy theatre and hoped for a good performance.

It was not a good performance and the printed text of the play provides in the reading a much more exhilarating theatrical experience. It opens with a murder-mystery situation in which a very rational and stolid police inspector investigates the mysterious disappearance (suspected murder?) of an ordinary housewife. He questions the maid then the husband and gradually it dawns upon him that both are stark, raving mad. Soon, the investigation turns into a nightmare in which time and space become fluid and amorphous and where the past exists physically side by side with the present and the future. As the inspector loses all his rational props and approaches total derangement, the wife reappears, fails to account for her absence, and is subsequently killed by the husband (as a certain mysterious "dervish" he once met on a train had prophesied he would do). The scene with the "dervish" is not verbally "recalled" but "enacted" in the present, complete with train compartment, inside the drawingroom, simultaneously with the ongoing action, with the husband split into two figures. When the husband rings up the inspector to report the crime, he discovers that the body had mysteriously disappeared.

Ultimately, of course, *O, Tree-Climber* is a "play of ideas" which proposes the impossibility of knowing the truth and contrasts the rational, progressive view of life with the pagan, cyclic one. But it does so by harnessing the conventions of the two surviving genres of truly

popular theatre: farce and the whodunnit – both of which require intricate plot and simplified characterization. For once, El-Hakim was able to hit upon a suitable theatrical vehicle for his ideas and produced a play that vividly recalls the wit and theatrical exuberance of a Joe Orton play.

El-Tali'a production fell dismally short of achieving either wit or profundity. The hilarious contrast between the highly formal language the characters speak and their seemingly crazy behaviour disappeared thanks to the adaptation which replaced El-Hakim's imaginative classical Arabic with a dull, inane brand of colloquial speech. Apart from this, and the many foisted songs and dances, the adaptation consisted in presenting El-Hakim's play as "a play-within-a-play". The frame-play which the dramaturge supplied to "correct" El-Hakim's text, as he said, consists of an initial scene in which a theatre director appears to explain to us *ad nauseum* how he had been forced by the theatre manager to undertake directing El-Hakim's play. After many embarrassingly silly jokes and forced attempts at humour he sits down to rest and falls asleep. I foolishly thought it was a sign for the play proper to begin; I imagined the adaptor wanted to present it to us as a dream of this particular silly director and was prepared to accept that. Instead, it turned out to be a sign for the dancers to barge in.

What followed was a weird concoction of erratic scenes from the play, badly mauled and severely mutilated, interspersed with the director's screaming objections and brief squabbles with the actors and stage-hands, and doused with sentimental political songs about social justice and the rich and the poor. At times I was not quite sure whether I was watching El-Hakim's play, an animal fable, a silly didactic play or

a shoddy pantomime; and once or twice I was almost sure I had mistakenly walked into a stupid children's show. Still, I was prepared to forgive all this; sloppy, mushy shows are, after all, around us in abundance. But then came the cruellest cut of all: the funny, quizzical "dervish", El-Hakim's emissary of The Absurd, suddenly appeared in tails and top-hat as the emissary of the U.S.A., remote-controlling all the characters on stage. I am all for denouncing "the new world order"; but what about the integrity of art?!

Still Waters:*

Sheherazade

Last December, Sheherezade, the internationally famous tale-spinning odalisque of the *Arabian Nights*, graced the National theatre with her presence as the guest of playwright Izzat El-Amir who conjured her up in his *Reign of Sheherezade*. Her winter sojourn there (unlike her earlier one back in 1966, when director Karam Metaweh staged Tawfiq El-Hakim's reading of her character) proved painfully banal and lasted for three tedious weeks; everybody was glad to see the back of her. Two months later, however, she made another sudden appearance, this time at Al-Hanager and incognito, as the intellectual daughter of the honest vizier in Abu El-Ela El-Salamouni's *Diwan Al-Baqar* (The Chronicle of Cows). And now, before we have had time to miss her or, rather, to recover from her two former disastrous visits, she has popped up once more at Al-Hanager, in a play which carries her name, by Tawfiq El-Hakim.

This time, however, the lady has vastly improved. She comes clad in the diaphanous, shimmering robes of metaphor, spelling the eternal, inscrutable mystery of life. Compared to Raghda in *The Reign of Sheherezade* or to Nahid Rushdi in *The Chronicle of Cows*, actress Salwa Khattab seems to have the weaker part dramatically speaking. It is a part with no depths of any kind, no history, no definite features — no flesh for an actress to get her teeth into. One is tempted to read in this reduction of the rich character to a mere symbol of Shahrayar's quest an instance of El-Hakim's widely publicised misogyny. But then

* 4 May 1995.

such a reading would immediately collapse in the presence of Ms Khattab who strikes the viewer as more alluring, more fiery and real than any previous Sheherezade — and this despite the rigorous economy of Gamil Rateb's production and its deliberately cultivated glacial atmosphere.

The production, which is a repeat of an earlier one done in Paris by Rateb with French actors several years ago, bears all the marks of the French classical tradition — the cool, hard, elegant surface, the intense passion beneath, the austere simplicity and clarity of design, the statuesque movement, the sculptured poses and resonant vocalisation. Rateb also, true to his Comedie Française training, strove hard to capture on stage and make audible the inner rhythms of the author's mind and the music of his idea. In his hands, El-Hakim's seemingly dry intellectual drama came alive and gained in tragic stature. The rigidly schematic conflict between the male and female principles, between the mind and the body, essence and transient manifestation, became in this production a desperately urgent existential quest, charged with real, good old French *angoisse*.

Keeping faithfully close to the spirit, rather than the letter, of the text, Rateb wisely condensed it, removing all the marginal characters and keeping only the central trio (Sheherezade, Shahrayar and his vizier, Qamar) and the character of the slave which he made into a silent part. In consequence, the performance gained in speed, concentration and intensity. The icy surface glowed with an inner fire and one could almost hear a mad, palpitating rhythm underneath.

With great sensitivity, Rateb distilled the two major extended metaphors in the text and reproduced them visually on stage in the set design, the lighting and the movement patterns. The "circle" and the

"mirror" figure prominently in Shahrayar's speeches as metaphors for life, spelling the futility of his impossible quest. He sees nature as a vicious cycle of birth and renewal, followed by death, and fails to see the sense of it; he feels imprisoned in a world of mirrors that yield nothing but transient images and passing reflections and longs to break through them to reach the "reality" behind the appearances.

The two metaphors are visually joined in the set in a semi-circular arrangement of mirrors around a deliberately small major performing area which represents at once Sheherezade's quarters and the whole world. The mirrors reflect the scene from different angles, breaking it up into multiple images. The position of Sheherezade in the set, facing her pool of clear water (another source of reflection) ensures that her image predominates — she is everywhere you look. The existence of the pool in the middle of this restricted area imposes a pattern of movement that is either circular, or in short straight lines along its back and front sides — lines that inevitably collide with the wall of mirrors. When Shahrayar finally leaves this hall of mirrors, thinking he has broken free, and embarks on his travels to Egypt and India in search of knowledge, we see him first on the right, just outside the circle of mirrors, but his reflection is caught in one of them on the opposite side; and as he watches the sinking sun with his companion Qamar (Moon), the lighting picks up Sheherezade and suffuses her into a rich, orange glow. Where can the poor man escape? To the other end of the stage (the world) perhaps? He does. But, ironically, the movement draws a circle round the inner circle; he is still rotating in the orbit of Sheherezade.

Inevitably, he returns to the glittering prison, realizing that he has never really left it and that only death can free him. He finds Sheherezade sitting inscrutably as usual on her studded, wooden chest (the only prop on stage and palpably a symbol of her mystery), and discovers the ghost behind the mirror — a half-naked black slave whom Sheherezade had deliberately planted there in a last bid to arouse his sexual jealousy and bring him back to her worship, even through her destruction. But Shahrayar is already a dead man as she later declares. Only a man committed to life can respond to its passions. When Shahrayar sends the slave away free, a burst of sharp, wailing notes is followed by Sheherezade's calm statement that her real worshipper, Qamar, had severed his head upon seeing the slave come out of her room. He could not stand the degradation of his goddess and his loss of faith. In a patch of pale blue light, the defeated Shahrayar delivers his last monologue, then withdraws to die, leaving Sheherezade by her pool, in a halo of golden light.

The performances of all the actors, including the silent slave, were beautifully economical, meticulously controlled and finely orchestrated. Amr Abdel-Geleel as Qamar was fittingly bashful, tense and faltering; Salwa Khattab was alternately cool, hard, soft and sensuous, but baffling in all cases; and Gamil Rateb as Shahrayar bodied forth in every tone and gesture the agony and frustrated rage of a man hounded by a thirst for the unknown and faced with a wall of silence. His final anguished words had a genuine tragic ring that kept reverberating in my ears for days after the play. As for the slave, whose name I sadly failed to get, he performed his silent part with great body eloquence, intimating force, wariness, terror, pent up animal energy and mindless instincts. Like Sheherezade, he too seemed a ruthless, inscrutable

mystery, and Gamil Rateb was absolutely correct in clarifying their ambiguous sexual relationship in El-Hakim's text and spelling it out on stage.

Having said this, would it sound pernickety to complain about the many grammatical mistakes made by the actors in delivering their Arabic lines on the two occasions I saw the play? Well, perhaps it was all part of the Frenchness of the evening.

A Question of Legitimacy:*

The Sultan's Dilemma

In 1974, four years after Sadat's access to power, Tawfiq El-Hakim published a scathing critique of Nasser's regime entitled *Awdat El-Wa'i* (The Return of Consciousness: Political Memoirs). The book which amounted to an outright denunciation of the 1952 *coup d'etat*, drawing attention to its totalitarian nature and many abuses of human rights, infuriated Nasser's supporters and the Left and has since proved a highly controversial document. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, El-Hakim had been a staunch supporter of Nasser who is reported to have often professed great admiration for El-Hakim, describing his 1933 patriotic novel, *Awdat Al-Rooh* (The Return of the Soul) as one of the seminal influences on the thought of his generation.

No one seemed to understand the reasons behind this sudden, drastic turnover which deliberately, and somewhat sardonically, draws attention in its title to Nasser's favourite novel. He certainly did not need to curry favour with the new ruler, and socialist thinker Mahmoud Amin El-Alem stoutly denies that he could have written it under pressure. "He was not that kind of man," he asserts. El-Hakim had been close to the people in power for two decades and could not have been blind to their brutal practices and many forms of corruption. Had he hoped that, with his support and moral guidance, the regime would soon correct its course and steer the country towards democracy? Did the 1967 defeat suddenly convince him of the falseness of this hope and lead him to a thorough revision of his former views? Did he genuinely

* 22 April 1999.

believe that Sadat's reign would prove more liberal and tolerant of political opposition? Though no one has been able to give a satisfactory answer to any of these questions, in *Al-Sultan El-Ha'er* (The Sultan's Dilemma), El-Hakim himself seems to provide us with a clue.

Published in 1960, the play debates under a thin historical veil the legitimacy of Nasser's rule. It opens with a man awaiting death at dawn because he dared announce that the new sultan could not legitimately take the throne bequeathed to him by the former sultan since he was still a slave. It turns out that the former sultan had forgotten to set his favourite Mameluke free before he declared him as his heir. Legally, the new sultan is now, since the former sultan's death, the property of the national treasury. To achieve legitimacy for his reign, he has to be sold by the treasury in a public auction to someone who would be willing to immediately set him free. The sultan's vizier and army generals oppose this solution, advising the use of brutal force to suppress the news and quell any opposition. Finally, however, the sultan bows down to the rule of law. Heeding the warning of the supreme judge that he could never feel secure without legitimacy, he accepts the humiliation of being sold to a rich, beautiful widow for one night after which he is freed. Needless to say, the widow (referred to in the play with the word "*El-Ghaneya*" which literally means "the rich" but has connotations in the popular mind with "the courtesan") is posited as a clear symbol of Egypt.

It is not known how Nasser responded to this veiled plea for free elections and democracy. But, at least, the play was not banned and was successfully staged at the National by Fattouh Nashati in 1961 with the redoubtable Samiha Ayoub and Mohamed El-Dafrawi in the leading

parts. The political message of the play remains as valid today as it was in the 1960s, which explains its continued political relevance. Nevertheless, what keeps the play fresh and makes it dramatically vibrant is El-Hakim's vivid and lively characterisation, particularly in the case of the witty, ebullient, merry widow. Though he delighted in posing as an inveterate misogynist, El-Hakim's portrayal of this character is positively feminist. She is projected as an intelligent, strong-minded, independent, modern woman who rejects the traditional images and roles of the female sex in conservative Arab societies, flaunts all social conventions, holds a literary salon in her home and mingles freely with the literati and artists of her day, not heeding the many slanderous rumours that surround her name. Indeed, compared to other Egyptian dramatists, El-Hakim seems to champion the image of the 'new woman' in his plays, creating a gallery of female characters who are not only equal to men, but often far superior in wisdom and judgement.

In the current AUC production of the play at the Wallace, this feminist thrust is abundantly clear. What distinguishes this production however from the one mounted in 1961 is director Mahmoud El-Lozy's new interpretation of play's central issue. Without changing one word of the original text or adding any new lines, El-Lozy manages to contradict the play's optimistic assumption that autocratic regimes could be persuaded to seek legitimacy by submitting to the law and the will of the people. Opting for modern dress for all the characters, except the heroine and her women, he projects the sultan and his entourage as a typical Third World junta, masquerading in civilian clothes and playing at obeying the law while ruthlessly eliminating anyone who interferes with their game or threatens to expose it.

The updating of the setting, costumes, props and dramatic context removes the illusion of historical distance and exotic places, together with all the traditional romantic paraphernalia that go with them. The world created by El-Lozy is disturbingly close, familiar, and menacingly real. The heroine, in terms of what she metaphorically represents and visibly wears, is and looks like an alien, a misfit, a foreign body which will inevitably be rejected. Instead of the original reconciliatory end in which the sultan, having gained legitimacy at her hands, bestows his ring on the widow, who represents Egypt, in a symbolic marriage between ruler and subjects, El-Lozy makes the executioner and a security officer throw a sack over her head after the sultan leaves and drag her away to certain death. It was a devastatingly cynical and bitter twist – all the more shattering because one suddenly realised that everything in the show had subtly prepared the way for it and relentlessly pointed in its direction. One wonders how El-Hakim would have thought of this new reading of the play had he lived to see it.

Reflected Glow:*

A Bullet in the Heart

A play entitled *Rusasah fil Qalb* (Shot Through the Heart, or, literally, A Bullet in the Heart) would normally suggest either a gory melodrama or a blood-curdling thriller. To most Egyptians, however, particularly old-movie fans, the phrase spells nostalgia and is redolent of romance and old-world charm. What have old movies got to do with it? Well, practically everything.

The play, which Tawfiq El-Hakim (1898-1987) wrote in 1931, following his return from a five-year spell in Paris, was a conscious attempt to introduce romantic high comedy to the Egyptian stage, then wallowing in farces, vaudevilles, musicals and melodramas. Paris had changed him and weaned him from his earlier fondness for these forms. In his autobiography, *The Prison of Life*, he says : "At the time, theatre was dead ... There was nowhere I could present the kind of plays I was writing at the time. The only serious groups were the amateur ones, like *Jam'iyat Ansar Al-Tamthil* (Acting Champions Society) ... I wrote *Rusasah fil Qalb* especially for them ... I wanted it to be different from the general run of comedies, mostly adapted from foreign texts, which presented caricatures rather than characters and relied on verbal jokes and farcical situations and surprises ... I wanted a comedy which depends for its whole effect on dialogue between real people, and on that alone."

For a theme he picked the age-old conflict between love and friendship, idealising both through the self-sacrifice of the hero and

* 20 April 2000.

playing on the old romantic belief in the power of true love to reform rakes. Naguib, an attractive, happy-go-lucky playboy, living wildly beyond his means and constantly chased by debtors, glimpses rich, beautiful Fifi at Groppi's eating ice-cream and is suddenly and hopelessly smitten with love. It soon transpires that she is the fiancée of his closest friend, Sami, a hard-headed opportunist and social-climber who covets her wealth and family name. Predictably, Fifi gravitates towards the good-natured, prodigal Naguib and, having seen through Sami, decides to break off her engagement. When she offers her love to the reformed Mohsen, however, he declines on the plea that it would mean betraying his friend even though, as he admits, this friend does not deserve her.

El-Hakim does not explain why the Acting Champions did not go through with the production, only saying that "the group were soon infected with the general apathy." Maybe they deemed its elegant, witty dialogue and refined humour unsuited to the vulgar times. In any case, the failure of the project was one of the reasons which led to El-Hakim's public championing of "closet drama" and his famous statement, in his introduction to *Pygmalion*, that his plays were intended for "a theatre of the mind".

It was not until 1964 that *A Bullet in the Heart* was presented on stage, but by that time it had become hugely popular in its 1944 musical film version for which El-Hakim himself wrote the script. The stage production was intended to cash in on the popularity of the film. But those who went to see it missed all the things they loved in the film: Mohamed Abdel-Wahab's inspired and thrilling musical innovations; Hussein El-Sayed's dramatic and witty lyrics which stuck close to the

text; the harmonious blending of song and spoken dialogue in the crucial scenes between Fifi and Naguib (here rechristened Mohsen); and Mohamed Karim's daring and original direction, including a sequence showing Abdel-Wahab in a foamy bath tub, singing of the virtues of water on a hot day and prescribing having a bath as a cure for all aches and pains, including those of the heart.

Indeed, this song is emblematic of the whole tone of the film which is consistently lighthearted, playfully cool with subtle shadings of suave irony, and contributes to the air of elegance and sophistication which permeates the whole movie. People, like Hussein Fawzi, who criticised its glorification of love at first sight, failed to grasp the essential make-believe nature of the artificial world it presents. It was like asking a comedy as fragile and sparkling as Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* to present a complex, analytical view of human passions and foibles. Also missing from the 1964 production was the new, happy ending El-Hakim provided for the 1944 film script at the insistence of Mohamed Abdel-Wahab; no wonder it did not last a week.

The current revival of the 1931 text, by the State Theatre Comedy Company (at Miami theatre), was the idea of veteran musical theatre director Hassan Abdel-Salam. The modest budget he was allowed drastically curtailed his ambitious conception and curbed his usually lavish style. Nevertheless he has managed to come up with a formula that guarantees popular success: plenty of music, a wistful sense of faded elegance in the sets and costumes, and two attractive popular singers (Ali El-Haggar and Angham) in the lead. But the really potent element was playing up the sense of nostalgia through the use of humour. Abdel-Salam knew very well that every member of his

audience had seen the film and that a comparison was inevitable. So, rather than try to avoid it (a futile effort, he shrewdly judged), he openly embraced it and made it part of the fun. The sections of El-Hakim's dialogue immortalised by Abdel-Wahab and Raqia Ibrahim in the film were heavily underlined, nudging the audience to project what they remember on what they see, to superimpose images upon images and watch the present in the reflected glow of an elegant past. Comedian Sami Maghawri (as Sami), on the other hand, did his comic best to drag the past, as idealised in the movie, into full view and subject it, together with the present and our sense of nostalgia, to a shower of gentle mockery. The result was a liberating sense of playfulness, a faint aura of glamour, and an affectionate celebration, not just of El-Hakim or Mohamed Karim's old movie, but of the whole art of manufacturing images and fabricating illusions.

Taking Another Shot At
*Rusasah fil Qalb**

In the recent Al-Warsha production which graced the Independent Theatre Week, Hassan El-Gretly and his cast and crew (an independent group just like *Ansar El-Tamthil* for whom El-Hakim had written the play and on whom he had pinned so many hopes) have finally managed to give *A Bullet in the Heart* its definitive stage production and free the text from the bedevilling shadow of the film version. With meticulous attention to the text and stage directions, including El-Hakim's introduction of a sexually suggestive French song by Josephine Baker in one scene, masterful orchestration of tone and rhythm with exquisite control and manipulation of pauses, carefully thought out sets – initially austere and muted (Sami's clinic), then elegant with a touch of abandon and flamboyance (in Naguib's flat) – El-Gretly maneuvered Botros Ra'ouf, Vanya Exerjian, Ahmed Mokhtar, with Medhat Fawzi and Ramadan Khater alternately playing Abdallah, the caretaker, in an intricate tonal dance which made the text glow like a sheet of crystal shot through with the colours of a blazing sunset. The romantic idealistic thrust was there, but was never shallow or facile. It came across as idealism bought at a tremendously high price. Naguib, as delivered by Botros Ra'oud under El-Gretly's direction, is no soft, sentimental, platonic lover.

The centre-piece in the set representing his flat is a reproduction of a famous erotic painting by the quintessential Art Deco portraitist

* 3 July 2003.

Tamara De Lempicka – the woman who was quoted to have said: "I live life in the margins of society, and the rules of normal society don't apply to those who live on the margin." For her famous *La Belle Rafaela* (1927), which El-Gretly and his set-designer Amr El-Rakshi picked out to add a new dimension to Naguib's character, she had used for a model a seductive women of the street and the London *Sunday Times Magazine* had described the painting as "one of the most remarkable nudes of the century" because Tamara had captured the lust in her subject. In the dialogue between Vanya and Botros one distinctly felt this overpowering lust in the form of an erotic undercurrent slowly building up though carefully suppressed. It momentarily erupted in oblique ways, in seemingly haphazard gestures – like Vanya involuntarily consuming chocolates, Botros adding a few loving touches to his volupuous Rafaela, or the two sitting back-to-front in the twin lovers' red velvet seat, so close, but with each facing in a different direction, intimating the sad end early on in the play.

In the final poignant scene, the stage is completely empty; Naguib's furniture has been publicly auctioned and removed in a grotesque sequence despite Fifi's desperate efforts to stop the sale; a cracked thirties record of a sad song by Om Kulthum fills the hall while the light picks up Vanya in profile at the back, looking pensively and longingly at Botros up front, while he resignedly, hopelessly puffs at his cigarette. Framed in a cloud of smoke, with the gilded, red-velvet-lined cabinet he called "the submarine" (where he used to hide from his debtors) behind him, but now with the back of it knocked out, revealing a black emptiness behind, one remembers the rich beauty of voluptuous

Rafaela, the promise of love and fulfillment in Baker's frisky song and that warm, inviting auctioned-off red lovers' seat and an anguished sense of loss, of missed chances sets in. With so much artistic variety, panache and debonair inventiveness, one cannot but hope that the Independent troupes will prove a real asset for the future of the Egyptian theatre.

Naguib Mahfouz

1911-....

Mahfouz's Dramatic Ventures*

In the 1960s almost any human activity in Egypt became heavily politicized; and theatre was no exception. Indeed, more than books or newspapers, and to almost the same degree as cinema, radio and television, it was regarded by the new regime as an invaluable propaganda organ for disseminating the new socialist ideology to a largely illiterate population. It could also serve as a kind of political forum or, more to the point, as a safety valve for dissenters to let off steam (and allow the regime to keep an eye on them into the bargain). Not surprisingly, it enjoyed the assiduous patronage of the state who sought to enhance its media effectiveness by setting up a number of TV theatre companies to provide a steady stream of appropriate plays for the small screen.

For the majority of writers and journalists, the temptation of nation-wide viewing, immediate feedback and overnight, far-reaching fame, not to mention the attention of the people in power, was irresistible and far outweighed the very real danger of having those much-dreaded, notorious "dawn-visitors" (as the secret police were euphemistically referred to in those days) materialize at their doorstep. Almost very one of them attempted drama at least once, and the phenomenon persisted well after the dismantling of the TV theatre troupes and even survived Egypt's defeat in the June war. Indeed, after 1967, and despite the intensification of censorship (with more plays being banned more frequently than ever before), writers, like Mahfouz, who had stayed clear of the stage in the heyday of Nasser's regime, disdaining to jump

* 13 December 2001.

onto the theatrical bandwagon, and content to thrash out their ideas and air their views in essays, novels or short stories, seemed to feel the need for a more dialogic, immediate and popular form of expression and turned to the theatre. In 1969 Mahfouz published a new collection of short stories, *Under the Umbrella*, which included five one-act plays: *Death and Resurrection, The Legacy, The Rescue, A Draft Proposal* and *The Task*. The same year, director Ahmed Abdel-Halim successfully staged the first three in a triple-bill, at El-Hakim theatre, with Sanaa Gamil, Galal El-Sharqawi and Ayda Abdel-Aziz in the leading parts. The combination of a strong cast and Mahfouz's literary reputation guaranteed good houses and the production lasted for two months – a substantial run by Egyptian standards in those days.

Death and Resurrection is a thin political allegory which makes a show of debating the urgent issues and fateful choices facing Egyptians after the June defeat. In a series of encounters, the nameless hero (who is curiously flung onto an almost empty stage from the wings in exactly the same way as Samuel Beckett's hero in *Act Without Words*) meets first his girl friend, then a fatherly giant, a bearded doctor and a blind beggar – all equally nameless; but though the dialogue is engaged with arguments about life and death, peace and war, democracy and dictatorship, individual freedom and public duty, the text comes across as a straightforward morale-booster, advocating armed resistance and self-sacrifice. It ends with the corpses lying in the background, in the shadow of a pharaonic tomb, coming to life and marching off to battle with the hero at their head.

Written in the mode of expressionism, the play is loud in tone, full of patriotic declamation and lacks plot and characterization in the

traditional sense. The hero is the author's mouthpiece; the woman represents the life-force which tries to hold him back; the giant is a transparent symbol of the USA; the aggressive, gloating mocker laughing in the wings is obviously Israel; and the plague which infests the city is a clear metaphor – in the tradition of Albert Camus' *La Peste* – of a national malaise, in this case, Nasser's dictatorship, symbolized by the new head of the charitable institution from which the blind beggar (the ordinary citizen) escapes. The beggar's ironical description of this new head is amusing and sparks off some comedy in an otherwise uniformly humorless and grimly earnest text. "'Tis true, he was honest, fair and kind," he says, "but too damned keen on discipline. It was almost an obsession with him and he enforced it with astronomical precision – and no questions asked ... You ate according to schedule, drank according to schedule, went to the toilet, begging your pardon, according to schedule and slept according to schedule. I nearly went mad ... Even the luxury of feeling rebellious was denied me, for how could one rebel against an honest, just and kind man? My conscience wouldn't let me."

Unlike *Death and Resurrection*, *The Legacy* and *The Rescue* have not dated and could still appeal to audiences today. Fortunately for them, Mahfouz relinquished expressionism, opting for the more popular form of the realistic thriller, charging it with a strong sense of the absurd and adding a symbolic dimension. *The Legacy* centres on the conflict between religion and scientific progress which has obsessed Mahfouz throughout his writing career and ends without resolving it. The biblical story of the prodigal son, ironically inverted, provides the starting point. The protagonist, a pimp who runs a tavern, comes home with his mistress, lured by his father's promise of a legacy, but finds

the house empty and his father – a *wali* (holy man) – mysteriously vanished. A boy servant, however, leads him to his father's treasure which consists of a pile of old books and stacks of money. He ignores his father's command to read the former before touching the latter, whereupon a police detective suddenly materializes, telling him that his father has been murdered and accusing him of the crime. Instead of arresting him, the mysterious detective knocks him down, ties him to a chair and bolts with the legacy. The following morning, an architect walks in to buy the house, which the son is quite willing to sell to make up for the loss of the treasure. There is one problem, however: the architect is the spit image of the false detective. The question whether or not he is the same man is left unanswered and the play ends with the son putting aside his deep suspicions and selling the old house – symbolically his cultural and religious inheritance – to be pulled down and replaced with a factory of electronic equipment.

Mystery and suspense equally underlie the construction of *The Rescue* – a play which ironically contradicts its title. It begins with the teasing question: who is the woman who has forced her way into the flat of a strange bachelor to escape the state security police and what has she done to send them after her in such force? – and ends with the woman dead, still keeping her secret. But between the beginning and the end, a more significant revelation builds up. As the flat-owner tries to ferret out the truth about the woman, he draws closer to her, ultimately falling in love with her, and the relationship gradually reveals to us that he too, and everyone in the building, the neighbourhood, and, indeed, the whole country, is threatened, hunted, and in the grip of fear. By the end of the play, we are no longer interested in the initial question; the reality of fear – represented as the ineluctable mode of

existence in police states – is all that matters and no facts, no amount of rational reasoning can dispel or explain it away.

The Rescue was performed once more in September 1993 at the AUC, by a group of theatre graduates who call themselves El-Gouqa (The Chorus), and this time the play's mixture of obscenity, violence and black despair was sadly watered down to a thin gruel. It felt as if the actors were tackling the text from a distance, poking at it with their hands in white gloves. There was no panic here, no frenzied atmosphere, no sense of urgency. Indeed, when Khalid Hamza, as the friend, strolled in to announce that the building and the streets around were crawling with policemen he delivered his lines with the urgency of a man announcing the arrival of the milkman or the florist. Basil Mubarak, a talented and sensitive actor, was definitely miscast as the Man; he lacked the toughness, ruggedness and risqué air of the character. Maysa El-Rifa'i, as the Woman, was a visual treat and struggled hard to inject some fire into an otherwise limp and cold production but only fitfully succeeded. The tango she performed with Basil towards the end was enjoyable to watch but failed to suggest the "dance of death" it was meant to be. The tacking on of a sad poem at the beginning, albeit by Salah Abdel-Sabour, plus a sentimental song at the end further helped to defuse whatever potential for tension the show might have had.

The last two plays in *Under the Umbrella* have never been tested in performance. *A Draft Proposal* is a funny satirical skit, in the burlesque tradition, on the manners and morals of the theatrical profession. In a theatre-manager's office, an author, a director, a critic and two leading actors meet to discuss a new play. The discussion develops into a

heated argument which parodies the attitudes to theatre prevalent in the 1960s – the disgust at the commercialism of modern theatre and its star-system, the conflict between dramatists and directors, the narrow-minded vanity and self-centeredness of actors, the obstinate self-righteousness of authors and the pomposity and pretentiousness of critics. The new trends in writing are also satirized, particularly the impervious ambiguity and obfuscating symbolism of avant-garde plays like Mahfouz's own. When the actress, who is notorious for her many lovers, is caught kissing the author behind the back of everybody, including her lover, the actor, a farcical fight erupts in which every one gets a fair share of blows, including the actress. When a glib reporter prances in looking for news of the new production, he finds the company prostrate and is told, by way of explanation, that they had just finished a rehearsal. Mahfouz should have laid down his pen at this point. The final romantic scene in which the actress begs the author not to leave her, or the company, is sentimental, totally out of key and a terrible anti-climax.

Unlike the earlier plays, *A Draft Proposal* is realistic from beginning to end and completely free of symbols. *The Task*, on the other hand, begins in a deceptively realistic vein as a thriller, with a mysterious man tailing another for a whole day and even following him to a romantic date at sunset in a lonely spot. Gradually, however, the relentless pursuer begins to acquire sinister shades, reminiscent of Eugene Ionesco's 'killer' in *Tuer Sans Gages*. When he is joined by another ambiguous figure and the two subject their victim to a harrowing investigation, the play turns into a grotesque metaphysical/political trial and veers sharply in the direction of Kafka and the theatre of the absurd. Indeed, the final scene in which the two mysterious

persecutors lash out against their terror-stricken prey vividly evokes a similar scene in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, where two mysterious callers, Mr. Goldberg and Mr. McCann, turn up at Stanley's secluded boarding-house at the edge of the ocean to harry him with nerve-racking, inconsequential questions.

After a lapse of four years, Mahfouz produced another one-act play, *The Chase*, published in the short stories collection, *Crime* (1973), and in 1979, *The Mountain* and *The Copper City (Or The Devil Turns Preacher)* appeared in another collection, bearing the alternative title of the latter play. *The Mountain* is a political parable which takes a very grim and cynical view of armed political revolutions, seeing them as the root cause of all dictatorships and grounding them in the concept of elitism. Five young men set up what amounts to a revolutionary command council in a cave at the top of the Muqattam mountain, complete with a list of enemies of the people whom they go about liquidating. The violence is grotesquely portrayed, with a tinge of hysteria, and at moments becomes embarrassingly melodramatic. *The Chase*, on the other hand, is an absurdist drama, purely preoccupied with "Time". Here, another mysterious pursuer chases two men through adolescence, youth, maturity and old age, always keeping them on the run and giving them no respite. The action consists of their attempts to elude him, which include many ruses and various disguises; they even marry the same woman to confuse him and exchange her for a younger one when she ages.

In *The Copper City*, successfuly directed by Ahmed Ismail for a regional company in Assyout in 1989, "Time" figures once more and is the real protagonist. Inspired by a tale in *The Arabian Nights*, it shows two Arab merchants arriving at an enchanted copper city, thousands of

years old, with an evil sleeping beauty for a queen. With the help of a bottled 'jinni', they undertake a trip back in time to see what the city was like before the curse and try to save it from its terrible fate and alter the future by changing the present. The queen, however, who covets the infinite power of the gods, insists on installing herself as a goddess to be worshipped by her subjects. The moment this happens, the city loses its one chance of redemption; time freezes, and everything turns to copper. Despite its fairytale setting and atmosphere, *The Copper City* is essentially a cautionary play — a warning against Sadat's incipient autocracy.

Compared to his achievements in the novel, Mahfouz's plays are bound to look modest and limited in scope. But viewed in the context of contemporary Egyptian drama, they reveal many areas of interest. Like some of Tawfiq El-Hakim's plays, they are among the first attempts to introduce philosophical issues on the stage and debate them in dramatic terms. Many of them, too, reveal an awareness of the resources of the stage and effectively manipulate set, sound and movement to shape the situation and action of the play and invest it with symbolic significance. In *The Legacy*, for instance, the traditional blackout is put to original use for theatrical effect. One of the scenes is conducted in total darkness, with not a single light on stage or in the auditorium, the stage-directions insist; this leaves the audience with only human voices, interspersed with silences, the sound of whimpering and two screams. It is as though Mahfouz was drawing on the resources of radio drama to communicate to the audience the atmosphere of the ancient, haunted house and the characters' terror and anxiety. The intriguing oddness of incident and character in many of the plays, coupled with an air of mystery and suspense and an underlying sense of futility and alienation,

is another interesting feature. Mahfouz's dialogue too, though in formal classical Arabic – a medium rarely used in the theatre in the 1960s except in verse drama or translated foreign texts – is generally economical and, at its best, rich in images and expressions from the vernacular and shot through with flashes of wit.

Whatever the faults of Mahfouz's plays, they have at least attempted to dramatise, often with reasonable success, not only his own dilemmas, perplexities and frustrations, but also the emotional and intellectual turmoil of a time of national crisis, when the Egyptian dream lay in ruins and every Egyptian, whatever his station or walk in life, felt a stranger in the world and an alien in his own country – like a redundant actor divorced from her setting.

No'man Ashour

1918-1986

A Light to Lesson Ages:*

Rifa'a El-Tahtawi

If you happen to be a Muslim of the masculine gender, and keen on your polygamous rights, you would be well advised to keep well away, with whatever number of henny-pennies you have managed to bamboozle and hen-run, from a recent production called *Succour, O Rifa'a*. Premiered in Suez, and currently on tour, No'man Ashour's documentary drama about the life and thought of the 19th-century enlightenment pioneer Rifa'a Rafi' El-Tahtawi will irk many and shame us all. It will also give us food for thought: apart from the many wonderfully progressive stands that man took on the issues of freedom, education, tradition and government – deftly interwoven into the text – the highlight of the evening is Rifa'a marriage to his cousin, Karima El-Ansari. While a chorus enacts the traditional *Zaffa* (wedding celebration), led by the mellifluous bride herself (stunningly presented by the melodic regional treat Ahlam Sa'd), a tiny tot of a body gets off the stage to hand out among the audience a facsimile of the marriage contract.

In this legal document (printed at the end), drawn up by the pious Azharite goom himself, Sheikh Rifa'a, in bold contravention to the all-hallowed and time-sanctified rights of Muslim males, freely binds himself to his cousin for the duration of their lives, voluntarily forfeiting the right to divorce her at will, and legally forgoing the indulgence of enjoying four wives simultaneously, together with whatever other female slaves he can afford. The document further

* 25 April 1991.

insists that any cohabitation with other females automatically renders the marriage contract null and void and entitles the wife to the full rights of the divorcee under Islam.

To think that such a contract was drawn up in the 19th century!

Only a week ago I was approached by a militant feminist friend canvassing for a reform bill on the same marriage and divorce laws that Rifa'a had simply cut across with the flourish of a pen! What bugged her, what is bugging us all the progressive women of this country (and *Succour O Rifa'a*), is the fact that when Egypt endorsed the United Nations Declaration of Women's rights it insisted on adding a codicil, rather like a sting in the tail, stipulating: "so long as it does not clash with the dictates of the Islamic Shari'a (law)!"

What a provisio! It amounts to a total doubling back, a negation of the most basic articles of the declaration. Sadly, in the year 1991, we seem to be still debating issues that our ancestors, like Rifa'a, Mohamed Abdou, Qasim Amin, Sheikh Ali Abdel-Razik and Houda Sha'rawi thought they had settled for us once and for all! Some ghosts, however, refuse to be exorcised, and it is not a joke to wake up one morning and discover that your right to education, to work, to choosing your own clothes and mate and to simple human dignity is still a moot point violently debated by your masculine mentors!

To have come away from this production by director Abbas Ahmed with nothing else but El-Tahtawi's marriage contract would have been quite well worth it; the show, however, had other bonuses. Most rewarding of all was the twin stage-set, by Ashraf Na'im, featuring at once Rifa'a's rural abode in Tahta and a Parisian *pension*. Arabesque portals and latticed partitions on the right contrasted harmoniously with a row of lace drapes on the left while a number of candles and lanterns,

deftly manipulated, lent both depth and several interesting points of visual departure. Attiyat El-Abnoudi's film tracts of Paris, a typical Egyptian village school, and a traditional peasant funeral were also unforgettable and highlighted dramatically the thorny question of cultural exchange and integration between east and west.

Abbas Ahmed also added some comic interludes of his own, devised to underline the basic issue of a woman's right to choose her husband. Traditional rituals and popular village-green games cut a high profile here while the Parisian lace curtains figured poetically as a strong and haunting leitmotif. East is east, and west is west, El-Tahtawi would concede; but he would argue, and has done in several books, that the "Twain" can meet provided we find the necessary filters (or philtres?!) In the play, El-Tahtawi's beloved Parisian curtains become the "filters of light" gently swathing the garish lights of Paris and the Egyptian sun in their soft benevolent shades.

This is a most rewarding and cliché-free production with lots of fun, visual exuberance, good music and easily digestible edification.

Marriage Contract

Sheikh Rifa'a El-Tahtawi

I, Rifa'a Rafi' El-Tahtawi, the penner of this document, hereby legally bind myself as part of my marriage contract to my cousin, the honourable *Hajjah* (who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca) Karima, daughter of the distinguished scholar Mohamed El-Farghali El-Ansari, to remain married to her alone acquiring no other wife or mistress of any kind. The validity of the marriage is tied to this condition, so that if I acquire another wife or woman of any description, whoever she may be, my cousin will be automatically and irrevocably free. The same holds true if I purchase a slave girl.

I hereby solemnly and irrevocably pledge that for as long as she maintains our ties of love, honouring her home, children and her husband, caring for her servants and slave girls, dwelling in the same place with me, I shall never marry another, acquire slave girls, or divorce her against her will until death us do part.

(Certified true copy of the original document kept at the Public Notary's Office in Cairo).

Castles in the Air:*

Tannery Tower

In North's *Plutarch* (1676) we read about people who "built castles in the air and thought to do great wonders;" and nearly two centuries later we find bishop Hall warning, in his *Contemplations*: "Ye great men, spend not all your time in building castles in the air or houses on the sand." Did No'man Ashour (the father of socialist realism in Egyptian drama, as he is often dubbed) have a similar warning in mind when he wrote *Tannery Tower* in 1974? As an ardent and committed socialist (which he remained until his death in 1986), Ashour must have watched with trepidation and growing despair the vast social upheaval brought about by the new economic policies launched by Sadat in the wake of the October war (in 1973), particularly the so-called 'Open–door' policy. It was a change that flaunted its existence quite flagrantly not only in the rocketing prices, the diminishing value of the pound, the feverish exodus to the oil-rich Arab states, and the inundation of the market with imported consumer goods (the possession of which soon became a status symbol), but in the very physical appearance of the streets, shops and buildings. Ugly housing towers and massive utilitarian buildings were sprouting everywhere, rapidly turning the city into a jungle of cement. I personally remember the shock I experienced in 1975 when, after years of absence, I wandered through Cairo looking for my old haunts and favourite walks and meeting only architectural horrors.

Ashour had used the housing block as a metaphor for capitablist society in one of his earliest, and perhaps most popular plays, *The*

* 7 April 1997.

People Downstairs (En-Nas Elli-Taht), and ended this optimistic play, written in the flush of revolutionary aspirations after Nasser's accession to power in 1954, with the younger generation moving out of the basement to seek a new home in *Masr El-Gididah*, or "new Egypt", which is what Heliopolis is called in Arabic. The pun at once referred to a factual place, in accordance with the realism of the play, and pointed clearly to Ashour's dream of a new, classless society.

The 1967 defeat knocked the bottom out of the dream, and by 1974 the dream had evaporated or, at best, become a sour memory or a cynical joke. The young men who had fought the 1973 war and thought that they had bought with their 'victory' the promise of a better future were soon disillusioned; the new social reality, with its ethic of quick and easy gain and living by one's wits, alienated and marginalized most of them, hardly allowing them a foothold. Graft and corruption were rampant and became the order of the day. It was a period which witnessed the mushrooming of night-clubs along Al-Haram Street, transforming it into something of an unofficial red-light district, an unprecedented influx of oil-rich Arab tourists, the rise of the worst type of commercial theatre and the migration of serious theatre to the provinces, the persecution of the left and the rise of religious fundamentalism, the fast sliding of the professional middle classes down the economic ladder and the spread of the veil among the women of those classes, both as a protest and an economic necessity. Evacuating one's home during the summer to let it furnished to some rich Arab became a familiar and widespread phenomenon; another was the marrying of girls under age to rich old Arabs in return for what looked to their poor and needy families as vast sums of money.

Egyptian cinema has since documented many of the ills of that period, particularly in the films that were once grouped under the rubric "the new wave". In the theatre, however, Ashour was, as far as I know, the first to tackle them in a full-length play. Written in the heat of the moment, *Tannery Tower* was obviously intended by Ashour as a scathing social satire on the mores and manners of the new class of business sharks and nouveaux riches which had suddenly and illegitimately risen to power. The family of Salama, a former modest trader in herbs and spices who suddenly shoots to wealth and power when he stumbles upon a treasure of hide in the vicinity of Cairo's abatoire where he lives, and subsequently moves out to a fashionable quarter of the city and invests the fortune he makes out of the sale of the hide in a housing tower, is presented as a microcosm, a miniature portrait of the new social reality in Egypt at the time.

Salama himself is morally and ideologically muddled, unwittingly torn between two worlds and two value-systems. Religious and pious in a facile, conventional sort of way, he seeks to pacify his conscience and curry favour with God by building a mosque at the bottom of the tower and going on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Meanwhile, the rapacious, avaricious woman (Dawlat) he has been secretly married to for fifteen years (a relationship that combines business with pleasure) is running the eight flats he has given her as a reward for her services as furnished pleasure dens for Arab tourists. The younger generation of the family is more sharply divided into two conflicting groups: on the one hand, the eldest son, Isam, his sister Fifi and, to a lesser degree, her husband (and cousin) Hanafi, are worshippers of Mammon and ardent believers in the new *laisser-faire* ideology; on the other, the youngest son, Hisham, who comes back from the front in 1973 on a wheelchair,

maimed and traumatized, and his wife (and cousin) Nadia, who tried to commit suicide more than once during his absence, embody Ashour's own bitter disillusionmen and fierce anger, occasionally voicing his urgent warning not to build castles in the air or houses on sand.

The working classes are represented in the play by a sharp, crafty house-painter and the family's shrewd, witty, self-educated and outspoken servant, Mubarak. The two provide much of the humour of the play and a running caustic commentary on what is taking place. Indeed, at times, the whole play seems to be projected from Mubarak's point of view, and since the character is an obvious theatrical convention, a combination of the wise Shakespearean fool, the wily servant of Roman comedy, and the Arlecino of the *commedia dell'arte*, his view of the action endows it with a definite and pronounced theatrical dimension.

Here, as in the best of his dramas, Ashour reaches beyond the boundaries of realism to draw upon the long-established conventions of popular comedy and harnesses parody, burlesque and, occasionally, even slapstick farce, as well as verbal punning and repartee. Though nurtured on Chekhov, Gorky and Shaw, he always remained a faithful student of Naguib El-Rihani and managed to put across his ideas and serious messages in a kind of dialogue that strikes one as very realistic and lifelike but is in fact intricately crafted to work on more than one level. Through the scintillating wit of the verbal exchanges and the hilarious parodying of the commercial jargon and business language of the day, Ashour gradually builds the tower into a metaphor for a muddled, schitzophrenic, self-destructive society, doomed because it lacks a solid, healthy base in reality — a society that is no more than a

castle in the air. Indeed, the word "air" (El-Hawa) crops up quite frequently in the dialogue in connection with the tower and is ironically handled to suggest a double meaning. The irony becomes quite pronounced in Act II when Salama's grasping wife, Dawlat, standing in the roof-garden of his villa at the top of the tower, staunchly declares: "We are up, high up in the air, and the whole of Egypt is at our feet;" and reaches its climax at the end of the play when the tower begins to shake and quake, suggesting its imminent collapse. How many housing towers built in the seventies have since collapsed? The number proves Ashour's farsightedness and validates his warning even after all these years.

That *Tannery Tower* was staged only once in the seventies (by Sa'd Ardash for the Modern theatre company), received with hostility in the press, then subsequently unofficially banned, is, perhaps, not surprising. That it should have remained neglected and almost forgotten throughout the eighties and until quite recently, is both a mystery and a great pity. It needed someone like Mahmoud El-Lozy – a rebellious intellectual with definite views on censorship and an excellent actor and sensitive director – to bring it to life again.

As an enthusiastic admirer of Ashour, El-Lozy (who did one of Ashour's plays, *Give Us Back Our Money*, into English a few years ago) stuck faithfully to the text of *Tannery Tower*, removing only (and quite wisely) some embarrassingly sentimental bits here and there, as well as Ashour's pointed, but quite out of place, attack on the techniques of Brecht's epic theatre, popular at the time. Realizing that the play did not so much depend on a developing plot as on the gradual unfolding of a metaphor, he kept the three-act formula with two

five-minute intervals during which the set was changed in full view of the audience. This was a pleasure in itself and quite in line with the palpably theatrical character of Ashour's handling of realism in this piece. The acting too partook of that exciting mixture of realism and broad theatricality, and the work was firmly located in its immediate historical context through the use of slides showing familiar postcard scenes of Cairo and newspaper headlines and stories documenting the significant events of the period. Inji Taha's costumes, too, were typical of the period in which the play is set, and so were Mohamed Hamed Ali's intelligent and unobtrusive sets which followed closely Ashour's stage directions.

But El-Lozy's most remarkable achievement in this production was his choice, casting and handling of his performers. They are all still students, studying various subjects, with only Ahmed Shams (Salama), Riham Ismat (Fifi), and Rami Imam (Mubarak) specializing in theatre; but their competence, technical proficiency, discipline and sense of rhythm were such as to put many a professional performer in the Egyptian theatre to shame. Indeed, Lamia Kamel was stunning as Dawlat, and so was Riham Ismat as Fifi. Both acted with the confidence, finesse, and sure-handedness that performers only acquire after years of experience. Impressive performances, too, were given by Mahmoud Rammah as the house-painter, Mahmoud Nofal as Isam and Ahmed Shams as Salama, while Tamer El-Mahdi, Mohamed Yusri and Yasmeen Fahmi did their best with parts that were originally written without much flair. As for Rami Imam (Adel Imam's son, as I was later told), he seems to have inherited his father's comic prowess and charismatic theatrical presence.

When I complimented El-Lozy on his choice of performers and asked him how many of them planned to take up acting professionally, I was shocked to hear him say that the Actors Union would never consent to giving them a license to practise professionally if they applied. No wonder the professional theatre is so anaemic where acting talent is concerned. It seems that nowadays one has to look for real theatre in such pockets as the Wallace and Al-Hanager, away from the Actors Union and the mainstream professional theatre.

Revisiting El-Doghrys:*

The Doghry Family

The AUC's annual production of an Egyptian play in Arabic has become for many an exciting and cherished event. Over the years it has treated us to rare and memorable revivals of some of the best works in the repertoire of Egyptian drama — plays like Tawfiq El-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma*, No'man Ashour's *Tannery Tower*, or Sa'deddin Wahba's *The Road to Safety* (all brilliantly directed by Mahmoud El-Lozy); and this year's choice was another Ashour masterpiece, *El-Doghry Family*, directed this time by Nivene El-Ebiary.

Written and performed at the National in 1963, *El-Doghry Family* (the name means in Arabic "the straightforward") belongs to what is generally described as the most fertile period in the history of the Egyptian theatre (1952-1967) when a new generation of playwrights appeared and wrote for the stage on a regular basis (even though it was impossible for any of them to make a living with creative writing as a sole profession). Like the majority of plays which belong to those halcyon days, it was produced within only a few months of its completion by a prestigious state-run company, with adequate state subsidies, a redoubtable director (Abdel-Rehim El-Zurqani), and a carefully picked cast of talented, well-trained and highly disciplined and dedicated actors. It was an instant hit with the public, but its critical reception did not match its popular success.

Ashour's reliance on the comedy of situation formula, his use of comic stereotypes and colloquial language (features which link his

* 5 April 2001.

dramaturgy to the earlier popular traditions of comedy in Egypt, particularly that of Naguib El-Rihani whose influence Ashour frankly acknowledged), together with the obvious lack of character development (though not of character revelation) and the absence of anything faintly resembling a firmly constructed plot came under severe critical fire. Despite the strong reformist purpose implicit in all his plays and their pronounced, underpinning socialist ideology (Ashour was twice imprisoned on a charge of belonging to a marxist underground party), the new generation of committed leftist critics were suspicious of any drama which seemed to hark back to older theatrical forms in pre-revolutionary Egypt, like El-Rihani's comedies. It was felt that the comic exuberance of Ashour's plays, their rampant, boisterous humour, zestful delight in the vagaries of human nature and good-natured tolerance of its weaknesses and foibles softened their satirical thrust, made the audience love and delight in all the characters, including the 'bad' (read 'reactionary') ones and, consequently, diluted their serious political import and rendered them less effective as weapons in the battle for social change.

Not surprisingly, such wrong-headed, narrow-minded criticism was uniformly blind to Ashour's delicate craftsmanship, particularly his subtle use of place or setting as active dramatic force and a unifying metaphor which informs the dialogue, provides dramatic focus and general atmosphere, generates conflicts and tensions and frames the deployment and orchestration of themes and motifs. In *El-Doghry Family*, the old family home is the real hero, at once the subject and generator of conflict and a symbol of an old way of life-rapidly disappearing and triggering ambivalent attitudes in the characters towards it. Indeed, in all his major works – *The People Downstairs*

(1956). *The People Upstairs* (1958), *El-Doghry Family* (1963) and *Tannery Tower* (1976) – this metaphoric use of place and setting is the operative formal principle and thematic matrix of the play. Each is built round a juxtaposition of places (and their social denotations) and the action takes the form of the characters' movement in and out of and between them, both physically and symbolically. The movement is at once horizontal between old and new, posh and popular, or rich and poor quarters of Cairo, and vertical – up and down a building (suggesting the social ladder) from the basement to the top floors. Indeed, together, the four plays form a kind of tetralogy which documents in terms of spatial relationships and movement the impact on Egyptian society – particularly the middle classes – of the change from a form of feudal-capitalist economy, via a form of socialism and state-control, to Sadat's *laisser faire*, or open- door economic policy.

To add insult to injury, the same critics described Ashour's robust, vivacious and high-spirited dialogue as "blunt and unattractive" and concluded that he "did not succeed (or perhaps was not interested) in transcending the barrier whereby drama written in the colloquial could become enduring literature." No wonder he bitterly inveighed against critics all his life. The popular success of his plays was largely attributed, not to any intrinsic artistic value, but to their brilliant casting. In the case of *El-Doghry Family*, the cast was, indeed, quite impressive; it included Shafiq Nur Eddin as the ruthlessly exploited, long-suffering, destitute but unwaveringly loyal, patient and forgiving family servant whose name, Al-Tawwaf (The wanderer), is a sign of his marginal, alienated status; the eldest son, Sayed, once a thriving, famous tailor, who withdraws into religion, becoming something of a mystic when he goes bankrupt, was played by Tawfiq El-Diqen, while

Mustafa, the self-seeking, social-climbing middle one, was Kamal Hussein, and Hassan, the youngest, who fails to complete his education and takes up football as a career, was Abdel-Mon'im Ibrahim. The two El-Doghry daughters were Malak El-Gamal (as the uneducated, petty-minded, grumpy and officious Zeinab who resents being married to a small, impoverished civil servant and has the typical middle-class upward aspirations) and Ragaa Hussein, as the younger, sweeter Aisha who works as a physical training teacher and is confused by the family's conflicting views and interests.

The rest of the characters were played by Nadia El-Sab' (in the part of Karima, the orphan and poor cousim of El-Doghrys who first marries Mustafa then, when he leaves her after getting his M.A. to seek a more socially advantageous marriage, his elder brother, Sayed); Salwa Mahmoud (as Mustafa's spoilt and selfish new fiancée); Ali Rushdi (as the niggardly Abul Reda Shanen, the former accountant at El-Doghry Bakery who rose to fortune by shady means and hankers after buying the Doghrys' family home); Ahmed El-Gizeiri (as Zeinab's timid, henpecked husband); and Abdel Rahman Abu Zahra (as the dreamy, voluble and effusive Sami, Shanen's son, a civil servant with literary aspirations who studies Arabic literature at university, disdains all material interests and bourgeois conventions, courts Aisha behind his father's back, and mystifies everybody, including his would-be fiancée, with his vain, often inane, display of eloquence). The acting style, a mixture of realism, farce and caricature, was tailored to the characters as penned by the author and, in the case of Abu Zahra (as Sami), the element of caricature was exaggerated since the character, who voiced many of Ashour's progressive views regarding love and marriage, was deliberately intended by the author as a self-mocking parody to guard against any hint of preaching or didacticism.

The memory of this captivating, effervescent 1963 production is kept green and transmitted to subsequent generations by a black and white video recording fitfully broadcast on television. This may explain why directors have consistently shied away from venturing upon a new production of the text and felt that the original one would be difficult to match, let alone surpass. That Nivene El-Ebiary has taken on *El-Doghry Family* for her debut as director and thereby dared where older and more experienced colleagues fear to tread, shows that she has guts, a genuine appreciation of good plays and a willingness to take risks to keep them alive on stage. But these are not her only assets; artistic precision, clarity and economy of detail, attention to mood and tempo, and the ability to guide and control her actors, to draw the best out of them while covering up their deficiencies, are others. With a young, non-professional cast of AUC students and graduates, some with no previous acting experience whatsoever, she managed to achieve a clean, uncluttered production – lucid, fast-flowing and devastatingly funny.

However, the performances varied in flair, ease and competence. In some cases, the actors (namely, Mustafa Hashish, as Hassan, Ala' Shalabi, as Ahmed *Effendi*, Zeinab's husband, and Amir Badr as Sami) were more than a match for the characters they portrayed, inventively recreating them in their own images; in others, it was the characters themselves, particularly al-Tawwaf, Zeinab, Azhar and Shanen (respectively played by Mohamed Abdel Rehim, Sarah Nur, Huda Mahran and Yehya Al-Diqen), who did all the work, bearing the actors along and carrying them to safety — which, by the way, effectively disproves the old and persistent critical view that the play's success in the 1960s was due to the casting. For the rest, Tamer Mahdi, as Sayed,

Yasmin Seheem, as Aisha, Mustafa Mu'nis, as Mustafa, and Nermeen Abdel-Fattah, as Karima, gave decent, credible and often sympathetic performances.

By putting *El-Doghry Family* to the severe test of a student production in 2001, nearly 40 years after it was written, Nivene El-Ebiary has vindicated its artistic merit and given fresh proof of its vitality, stage-worthiness, enduring relevance (even after the demise of socialism) and continued popular appeal. Furthermore, by sticking faithfully, almost fanatically to the text (save for a brief, nonsensical voice-over prologue, which warns the audience on pain of death to switch off their mobiles, and the physical removal of Susu, Zeinab's teenage daughter, from the stage to the wings where the characters could still address her), El-Ebiary has once more disproved the fallacy propagated by the state theatre organisation which obstinately claims that no play of the 1950s or 1960s can appeal to today's audiences without some form of updating. This usually means alterations that could range from simple cutting to the amalgamation of scenes and characters, the rearrangement of the performance into two parts instead of the traditional three acts, and/or the introduction of completely new elements, like song and dance, sketches and commentaries, or slides and film projections (all of which Samir El-Asfouri did in his last year's revival of Mikhail Roman's 1960s play, *Isis, My Beloved*).

At the door of the Wallace, I cynically thought that, apart from the few surviving television recordings of old plays, it was now up to the AUC to preserve for us and keep alive our national dramatic heritage.

Mikha'il Roman

1920-1973

Play It Again, Sancho:*
Tomorrow, Last Summer

Whenever the phrase "golden age" is voiced in theatrical circles, you can be sure that it refers to the relatively distant sixties. The period has become a legend; and like all legends, except for a few bright spots here and there, it is better off left in the misty shadows of the past. The wisdom of this has been borne upon me time and again over the past fifteen years whenever a revival of a so-called sixties' classic was attempted. The cultural climate and artistic sensibility seem to have drastically changed and many of the issues these "classics" tackle, particularly in the field of politics, strike us now as simplistic and shallow.

Some theatre people, however, have remained back there, stuck in the sixties, and refuse to move out. Every now and then, they dutifully, and somewhat quixotically, unearth a text, pathetically ill-suited to the times, and proudly parade it on stage, refusing any directorial tampering with its revered integrity and denying it even a shave and a change of costumes. There are some sixties plays, of course, which have a perennial freshness; but these are extremely rare, and in production, more often than not, have to be slightly updated, reinterpreted and given a new relevance.

Mikhail Roman's *Tomorrow, Last Summer*, currently playing at the big hall of El-Tali'a theatre, is not, unfortunately, one of these. Irritatingly, however, it is not the sort of play one can simply scoff at or

---

* 16 May 1995.

easily dismiss with a clear conscience as deeply flawed. It is an elusive, puzzling text which might yield itself admirably to psychoanalytic criticism since its primary purpose seems to be to evade the issue it wants to raise, to keep silent about the things it wants to say. The play hides behind a barrage of feverish, mystifying words.

A man rents a seaside villa for a couple of nights and arrives there in the company of a woman (wife? mistress?) who inexplicably chooses to remain in the car outside, out of sight of the audience, for over half of the play. She amuses herself, as the agent periodically reports, with polishing her nails, painting her face and listening to the radio. This seems quite at odds with what we hear from the man who tells us that they covered the distance from Cairo to Alexandria in under an hour at her own instigation, and that all the while she kept her eyes feverishly glued to the speedometer. We get an image of a frenzied naiad, half crazed with passion, with wild flowing hair streaming in the wind and a mad glint in the eyes. The man himself strikes us as none too sane; he is curt, gruff and rough in his manner and generally behaves as if suffering from deep neurosis. He can hardly wait for the doddering landlord and his bustling, rotund wife to vacate the villa. It is as if he is expecting someone or something to catch up with him soon and is anxious to enjoy his last hours of life or freedom. The old couple, however, cannot leave at once; they are expecting some prospective German tenants for their own villa. They stay to get what is coming to them.

Cornered into the company of his landlord — a stingy, prying, grabbing and mean-spirited dried old fish — the stranger suddenly changes course and goes off on a fresh tack. He starts to prod and bait

his host, startling him every now and then with bits of information about his (the landlord's) earlier life and his relationship with his wife. The old man is naturally troubled and so are we. As the old couple's fear and anxiety grow, revelations begin to tumble. (Meanwhile, of course, we have forgotten all about the woman in the car outside).

It transpires that the meek and placid old lady is a seasoned adulteress, that three of her children were sired by German summer visitors and the fourth, who is nearly black, by her husband's half brother whose mother was black. Where was the husband all the time? Well, somewhere in Africa, scrimping and scraping in some dingy little hole and refusing to let his wife join him since if she did he would save less. Half way through the revelations, and before they culminate in the old man dying of a cardiac arrest, the lady in the car rushes in and, rather than a naiad or even a gypsy, she turns out to be a bromidic damsel, limp and lachrymose. For the rest of the play she does nothing but sniffle and gasp, and act scared, tense and jumpy. As things get hotter and her man starts whipping the old couple with sneering accusations and acting as judge and angel of vengence, she keeps hurling herself at him and begging him to stop.

At this point, one feels at a loss what to make of her or how to relate her in any sensible dramatic way to the ongoing situation. The confusion deepens when she suddenly slips out the word "brother" when addressing her companion and one remembers his long, irate soliloquies and agonised, ambiguous harping on forbidden desires. Things are further complicated by the sudden intrusion of a story about two young lovers who spent a couple of nights in the villa many years ago then died. They, too, are referred to once as brother and sister, and

the manner of their death, let alone the cause, is deliberately left ambiguous. It is suggested at one point that they were called out by the distant drums of a clan of gypsies inhabiting the surrounding hills and walked into the sea never to be seen again. Another time we are told they were found dead in bed, in each other's arms. Murder or a suicide pact? Take your pick; both are vaguely hinted at.

If you're not familiar with the work of Roman, you may find yourself in deep waters. If you are, however, you will most assuredly pounce on the new tenant's name and that of his lady-love as a valuable clue. The names Hamdi and Gamalat recur obsessively in the dramas of Roman. Significantly, the two main characters in his first play, *Al-Dukhan* (Smoke), a brother and a sister, carried them. There, beneath the surface plot, their relationship formed an unspoken sub-text which we could fitfully glimpse through the dramatic cracks and sense in the text's many gaps, equivocal patches and silences.

Possibly, in *Tomorrow, Last Summer*, Roman was tackling once more the crisis of incestuous love, its passion, agony and sense of guilt. Incest, that frightful word, never spoken in the play but constantly hovering on the edges, is perhaps the only word that can make it cohere. It goes a long way towards explaining the lovers' hasty flight, the sense of urgency and impending doom, the ruthless aggressiveness of the protagonist towards his hosts, his savage digging into their past and merciless exposure of their hypocrisy, his frenzied pillorying of the bourgeois institution of marriage with its veil of moneyed respectability and his feverish, poignant asides and soliloquies. It also explains the choice of setting — the roaring sea, the distant sandy hills, the passionate free-roaming gypsies (outsiders and

outlaws) and the primitive call of their drums. Predictably, like their earlier, mysterious counterparts, Hamdi and Gamalat are escorted off stage at the end by a bunch of veiled gypsies, presumably to their death, but also to their freedom.

To work on stage, *Tomorrow, Last Summer* needs an magainative effort of interpretation and might make very good theatrical sense if presented as a surrealistic flow of dreams, fragmented memories, haunting obsessions and hallucinatory images. This would entail a degree of pruning and rearrangement of the text and a heavy reliance on concrete stage and sound imagery. The acting style would need to be different, stylized perhaps, but, in any case, not realistic. In such a stage context, realism would be lethal.

In directing the play, however, Abdel-Aziz Makhyoun showed the customary reverence for literary texts characteristic of the sixties and opted for a realistic set (designed by Salah Mar'i), realistic lighting by Ramsis Marzouq and realistic acting and sound effects. One negative result of this policy was reducing the set and lighting to a beautiful but inert and static background; it remained purely and superficially illustrative, contributing nothing towards illuminating the meaning or enhancing the dramatic tension or atmosphere. The viewer soon forgot all about it, and Rageh Dawoud's music too went almost unnoticed.

The realistic acting, on the other hand, failed to accommodate credibly the shifting moods of the drama, its turbulent undercurrents and many agitated soliloquies. More damagingly still, the meticulous realistic framing of the action, down to the minutest details (the kitchen utensils and the real tea in the glasses), led the audience at the outset to expect a straightforward sensible plot, with credible characters, clear

objectives and comprehensible motives. Instead, they found themselves plunged without warning into the treacherous depths of a well-camouflaged, slippery psychological drama and they floundered about helplessly trying to gain a secure foothold (be it political or symbolic) and slipping time after time. It might have been frustrating but, certainly, never dull.

An irritating evening? Yes. Still, it was nice revisiting the sixties.

Old Haunts:*

Che Guevara

Asim Nagaty is a very lucky young man. It was positively uncanny that the opening of his production of Mikhail Roman's *The Night the Great Guevara Was Killed* (his debut as a director at the National) should be heralded, on the very same day, with the news of the discovery of the hero's remains in some unknown grave in Bolivia after thirty years of his capture and execution. Although I knew that Nagaty had chosen the text over six months ago, and that his choice had been part of National's plan to revive the dramatic heritage of the sixties through young directors, I was, nevertheless, overtaken by a momentary feeling of awe as I shook hands with him at the gates of the theatre.

Roman, who in one aspect of his complex, often paradoxical and teasingly enigmatic personality was a socialist, wrote this play under the impact of a dual shock: the devastating defeat of the Egyptian army in the 6-day June war of 1967, and the death of the idealized and idolized Guevara in October of the same year. The play appeared at the National during the 1968-'69 season in a production by Karam Metaweh with MahmoudYaseen in the title role, but the text evidences an earlier date of composition. At the time it was regarded not just as a threnody and a panegyric for the man described by Jean-Paul Sartre as "the most complete human being of our age", but also as a much-needed morale-raiser for a defeated nation. It did not matter if few could make dramatic sense of the characters, setting or situation projected on stage,

* 24 July 1997.

find any thematic coherence in its wild verbal avalanche, or detect any logic in its abrupt and startling shifts of mood and tone. The virulent invective against the USA and all imperialist powers and reactionary regimes and the genuine sense of anguished disillusionment and desperate resistance touched a responsive chord in the audience then and proved cathartic.

Roman had obviously written it in the heat of the moment, so to speak, and it bore all the marks of a work written with passionate speed, without dramatic planning or deliberation, as "an overflow of powerful emotion", to quote Wordsworth. Inevitably, something of Roman's deep-seated ambivalence went into it, and very often the fiery revolutionary rhetoric suddenly and quite disconcertingly gives way to existential despair or religious resignation. Often the image of Christ is superimposed on Guevara, while the representative of the imperialist powers, or, more precisely, of the American ogre, takes on satanic dimensions. At such moments, one realizes, despite the expressionistic façade, the presence of the chorus and the layers of abstruse verbiage, that, stylistically, *The Night the Great Guevara Was Killed* belongs essentially to the genre of the medieval morality play. Indeed, Guevara's final affirmation of faith and hope despite his defeat and his honest acknowledgement of human frailty and fickleness transforms his execution into a sacrificial death — a crucifixion.

Thirty years on, after the collapse of communism, and now that the legend of Guevara has somewhat faded, it is difficult to recapture the fervour and enthusiasm the play inspired in the late sixties. The revolutionary rhetoric sounds facile, hollow and outdated and the call for continuous armed struggle, guerrilla warfare and martyrdom

positively menacing. Isam Nagaty's choice of the play, despite its glaring structural faults, was evidently inspired by the growing frustration and anger of the Arabs at the deadlock in the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks and at what they perceive as US apathy and bias in favour of Israel.

The text was slightly adapted to underline this new context and a number of songs were added to drive the point home. The adaptation, however, neglected to take into account the ideological complexity of the current Arab scene, its many cross-currents and conflicting sympathies, and failed to tone down the blatant sexism of most of the dialogue. The unfortunate result, perhaps unforseen by the director and his crew, was to simplify the play even further and orient it in the direction of militant Islamic fundamentalism. Guevara's call for a continuous revolution bore a frightening resemblance to the Islamists' call for *Jihad.* It was a painful irony since the first production to attract the critics' attention to Nagaty's talents as a director was an adaptation of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in which the image of the bearded, grotesquely ferocious fundamentalist replaced the metaphor of the rhino.

But artistically, and apart from the worrying message it involuntarily puts across, the production was generally modest and had few virtues. These consisted mainly in Khalil Mursi's performance of the satanic personification of the powers of evil, which was deliciously and quite appropriately sceptical and flippant, and Mohamed Nooh's music. For the rest, Hisham Gom'a's set was inordinately crowded and painful to the eye, Diana Calenti's choreography was positively naive and conventional, Khalid El-Isawi as Guevara was too pallid, and

Manal Zaki's personification of the red revolution was marred by her voluptuous contours, skin-tight, revealing scarlet evening dress and glittering high-heeled shoes. One had hoped for a less luscious revolution.

A Spectral Pageant:*

Isis, My Beloved

Whether one likes or dislikes Samir El-Asfouri's work as director one cannot but admit that throughout his long and active career in the theatre he has been anything but timid, run-of-mill, bland, or boring. Whatever the play — be it modern or a classic, foreign or home-grown, an original text or an adaptation — it invariably comes across carrying that distinct El-Asfouri flavour: a wistful longing for truth and decency, almost romantic in its touching tenderness, but stoutly laced in varying measures with dashes of caustic humour, acrimonious wit, or sardonic (and, recently, often recklessly nihilistic) cynicism. Even when working-away from the sanctuary of his beloved El-Tali'a theatre (where he did his best work, and was artistic director from 1975 till 1994), and producing farces, vaudevilles or mustical comedies for the commercial theatre, and however light, lavish or spectacular the production, he is often shocking or at least disturbing and almost always controversial. His latest production of Mikhail Roman's last play, *Isis, Habibti* (Isis, My Beloved), is no exception.

The play had a rough passage reaching the boards; it took several months to find a cast and when finally rehearsals started, half of it melted away, giving lame excuses. Replacements had to be found and in the case of some parts the search continued until ten days or less before the (more than twice delayed) opening date. The play was originally scheduled for the summer season and should have opened in

* 2 November 2000.

July at the latest; but by the beginning of August, El-Asfouri was still running around, frantically screaming that he had not yet had one rehearsal with a complete cast. "No actor is willing to sacrifice even a stupied, small or insignificant part in a T.V. soap opera to work in the theatre," he bitterly told me one evening on the phone. "I don't blame them," he added with a hint of sarcasm; "the work is easier, the pay better, not to mention the publicity. They get seen by millions. How many people go to the theatre nowadays?" Coming from a man who has never done anything in life but theatre — never working in radio, cinema or television — this was painful to hear and I felt the full force of his desperation.

Isis finally opened late in August, played for one week, then closed down for the duration of the Experimental Theatre Festival. Those first few performances gave the impression of a hastily scrambled, half-cooked production. It rambled, stumbled and hiccuped for four painful hours, losing half the audience at the end of the first part and many of those who stayed halfway through the second. When the actors finally took their bows, it was to a nearly empty auditorium. The production was obviously far from ready and badly in need of honing. The critical reception was disastrous; what could El-Asfouri be thinking of throwing at us this half-baked thing, many wondered. But those who knew the tale of woe behind this star-crossed production guessed the reason. The man had nearly despaired of ever putting the play together or getting it to the stage so that as soon as he had a complete cast he decided to open to prevent any absconding and use the one-week run before the festival as time for dress-rehearsals and for trimming, streamlining and polishing the show.

The *Isis* which opened in late September was a vastly improved version: lucid, compact and fast-paced, with vivid and powerful performances in all the leading parts and many of the minor ones. Unfortunately, however, because of the many unfavourable reviews which greeted the first opening, the play had acquired a bad reputation; and since the critics who had condemned it on the strength of the first viewing never came again, the reputation stuck.

When I watched the play a second time, it suddenly struck me that El-Asfouri's enormous body of work — over 50 productions before *Isis, Habibti* — had only included one of Roman's 15 or so known texts, and thought how ironical it was that when he finally decided to do another he found himself pursued by the same ill-luck which had dogged Roman's relation with the stage throughout his life. Indeed, of all the known playwrights of the sixties — the so-called architects of modern Egyptian drama — Roman, the most rebellious of them all, was the most unfortunate when it came to staging his plays; many of them were suppressed by the censor, surviving only as manuscripts, or banned during rehearsals or after the first performance; and the few that were performed in his life time (save, perhaps, *The Night Guevare Was Killed*, directed for the National by Karam Mutaweh in 1969), were either misunderstood, unfairly attacked, or lukewarmly received.

His dramatic debut, *Smoke*, directed by Kamal Yaseen and premiered at the National in 1962, was savagely torn to pieces by the redoubtable Lewis Awad, the leading critic of the day, who denied it the status of a play, scornfully dismissing it as "that *thing* called *Al-Dukhan*." His next play, *The Siege*, staged by Galal El-Sharqawi at El-Hakim (later Mohamed Farid) theatre in 1965, had a short run and

was never revived. *El-Ardahalgi* (The Logographer or Petition Writer), directed by Abdel-Rehim El-Zurqani in 1967, caught the angry mood of the times and fared better with the critics; and *Hollywood El-Balad*, a satire on the artistic scene in Egypt using the Faust legend, was modestly successful when staged by El-Asfouri at El-Hakim Theatre in 1972. It was the last production of a play of his Roman watched, and one hopes he got some pleasure out of it since he was cruelly destined by wanton fate to miss an imminent and far more thrilling drama on the stage of life. Roman died on 3 October 1973, only three days before the October War, the almost miraculous crossing of the Suez Canal and the storming of the invincible Barlev line. He had lived till the end with the bitter taste of the 1967 defeat, burning with shame and anger, and his death went almost unnoticed amidst the general jubilation.

Isis, My Beloved was Roman's last play, his swan song, and it is sad to think that he wrote it with no hope of sharing it with the public either in print or as a live performance. Reverting to the realistic mode of his early masterpiece, *Smoke*, he managed to avoid the irritating excesses and baffling ambiguities which marred some of his more experimental pieces and made others inaccessible to the general public. The writing remains as passionate as ever; but instead of the usual long monologues and fiery tirades, we have a lively, cunning dialogue which camouflages the growing sense of menace, the gnawing terror, the premonition of disaster, the gruesome brutality of the action and the final tragic fate of all the protagonists with a thin coat of mocking humour, light bantering, witty understatements and verbal horseplay. It is as if Roman wanted this final defence of freedom and democracy and denunciation of dictatorship, its reign of terror and police state, to be as lucid, vivid and convincing as possible. This is perhaps why he labeled

the play "a comedy in three acts", hoping that comedy would distance him somewhat from his characters, set them free from the dominance of his authorial voice and allow them to speak directly to the audience without his shadow coming in between.

Like many of Roman's plays, *Isis, Habibti* remained neglected for a long time. It was not published until 1986, in a limited edition, with an introduction by the eminent critic Farouk Abdel-Qadir. It was later included, with other unknown plays by Roman, in his *Collected Plays*, published in six volumes by the State Publishing House (GEBO). Why El-Asfouri should have suddenly decided to stage it in the year 2000 is any one's guess. Mine is that, apart from wanting to pay homage to Roman or do justice to an important dramatist unjustly treated in his life and unfairly ignored after his death, El-Asfouri perceptively realised that the play was as relevant today as it was the time it was written. The margin of freedom we enjoy at present should be jealously guarded and diligently expanded; and the only way to do this is to keep the frightful memories of the not so distant past green; never to forget the bugging, the sinister dawn-callers, the mysterious disappearances, the horrible tales of torture, the petrifying fear and crippling suspicion of everything and everyone, even one's own family, and the debilitating, morally corrupting and soul-consuming terror of living in a police state. After all, don't we still have emergency laws?

To drive the lesson home, El-Asfouri cast the play in an openly didactic, epic form, on the Brechtian model, dividing the text into short, quick scenes (which entailed some cutting and transposing of the original material); providing a narrator-commentator, a chorus, some sarcastic songs and dances, slide projections demonstrating the

fabrication of damning evidence against the innocent (but for the crime of outspokenness) hero, Hamdi, and video footage of Nasser's funeral as well as of the fictional lives and activies of the leading characters by way of introduction or explanation. Some of the supporting characters were updated, amalgamated or removed and replaced with new ones, like Miss X, the assistant of the head of the Intelligence apparatus, beautifully caricatured by the seductive Noha El-Amrousi.

But whatever changes El-Asfouri made, and they are many, he carefully preserved and sharply focused the central dual conflict — between Ali, the head of Intelligence, and the dancer Farida, his mistress by force, and her invisible husband on the one hand, and between the self-same brutal Ali and the young married couple, Hamdi and Gamalat, whose life he eventually destroys, on the other. He also kept the story of the Greek orator, Demonsthenes (the ardent advocate of democracy who commits suicide when defeated), which Roman used as a parable, but removed it from its original place in the text, framed it in a scene all by itself, foregrounding it and giving it more prominence.

Na'ima Agami's set and costumes were simple and functional, paying little attention to aesthetic considerations. The same goes for Samir Zein's score, which had the added virtue of being less obtrusive, quicker to forget and easier to ignore. The real strength of the show, in its second, revised, and much curtailed version, lay in the directorial conception and actual composition, the careful balancing of the two sides of the conflict and subtle orchestration of the movement between them, and, surprisingly, in the acting. The cast El-Asfouri was finally landed with may not have been the one he originally visualised; nevertheless, he managed to get out of them the best they could and

some of them, particularly Khaled El-Sawi, as Ali, and Fathi Abdel-Wahab, as Hamdi, gave powerful, psychologically accurate and cleverly nuanced performances. However painful the process of bringing this production to life, or untoward the circumstances that surrounded its birth, I hope El-Asfouri will not be discouraged and will continue to produce theatre. More than anything, I'd hate this production to be, like Roman's play, another swan song.

Sa'deddin Wahba

1926-1997

A Long Day's Journey Into *Light**

The road Wahba travelled from the sleepy village of Domeira, in El-Daqahliyya province where he arrived into the world on 4 February 1925, to the redoubtable National Theatre in Attaba square was a long and tortuous one. It swung him first across the Delta to the city of Damanhour and, six years later, carried him further north to Alexandria in the middle of thick air raids and heavy bombing. Throughout his life, Wahba cherished both cities and spoke of them with profound affection. Of the former he says, in the third volume of his *Diary* (published by El-Fajr, 1994-5), "it lives in my consiousness until today and will continue to do so until I depart this world. It is my town, though I was not born there, my home, though I do not officially belong to it. There, I learnt about life and discovered the meaning of things; its primary school gave me my first educational certificate and its big secondary school, which lay on its outskirts, hosted me for a year before the war (World War II) forced us to move out." The town's municipal library, into which he "stumbled shyly one day", introduced him to the world of reading, and there he wrote his first short story which was never published. In Damanhour too, at its municipal cinema, he watched his first movies (of which he particularly recalled Mohamed Abdel Wahab's *The White Rose*) and got his first experience of theatre when Yusef Wahbi visited the town with his company on tour and performed famous plays in their repertoire "like *The Children of the Poor* and *Resputin*".

* 20 November 1997.

In those days, the gifted children of many country folk had to grow up early, travel far in search of schools, and learn to live on their own, away from their families, if they wanted to pursue their education. Wahba was no exception; at the age of ten, or thereabouts, he was living alone in Damanhour, in rented lodgings — "a small room in a house which cost me ten piasters a month and whose main advantage was that its window was next to a street lamp which saved on the cost of the kerosene lamp I used for doing my school-work." The first day Wahba stepped into Damanhour alone, he instinctively slipped into the role of a grown man and did exactly like his father: "I bought the paper (*Al-Jihad*) which cost me five milliemes and drank tea at Al-Shaweesh cafe which stood next to the primary school, facing a small square where *Basbousa* (a sweet cake), *Fuul* (backed beans), and *Libb* and *Hummus* (melon seeds and chick-peas) vendors always took their place". Still acting the grown man, he took part in the 1935 violent demonstrations, shouting with the rest 'down with Hore', "without knowing at the time that the "cursed" Hore was Hore-Belisha, the British foreign secretary" (*Diary*, 3, p. 231). His first contact with the police whose ranks he was to join a few years later took place during those demonstrations and ironically took the form of a painful blow with a truncheon.

In 1941, the Wahba family was reunited in Alexandria where his father had moved to manage the vast estate of Prince Omar Toson there. Compared to Damanhour, life in Alexandria was overwhelmingly "dramatic": the constant air raids, the sounds of the battle in nearby Alamein, "clearly heard at dawn", "the hot shrapnel that burnt our fingers as we eagerly collected it off the roof after every all-clear siren," and, of course, the old bookstores, the well-stocked municipal library and the many theatres and cinemas.

The vague intimations of his future destiny he had felt as a lonely boy in Damanhour became more conscious and clearly defined for the adolescent Sa'd. He read voraciously, regularly frequented the cinemas and theatres, published his first article (in *Minbar al-Sharq* newspaper in 1942), wrote his first play while in the fifth form at El-Raml secondary school and directed it himself for the end-of-school celebration, and adapted Naguib Mahfouz's historical novel *Radobis* for the stage and sold it, on the advice of his Arabic teacher, to the Girls College in Gianaclis for five pounds (*Diary*, 1, 23-26). He also taught himself English after watching the film version of Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* at the *Rex* movie house, and from Maugham he graduated to reading Shakespeare, Ibsen and Oscar Wilde. Equally important in those formative years was Wahba's exposure for a whole month (the month of Ramadan) to Naguib El-Rihani's comedies at El-Ibrahimiya theatre. He had watched the famous Ramses company perform tragedies and melodramas in Damanhour and Alexandria, and admired Yusef Wahbi as Rasputin and Zeinab Sidqi in *La Dame aux Camelias*, but it was obviously comedy with its ordinary and ridiculous men and women and strong ties with social reality that captured his imagination and kept him going to the theatre every night for a whole month.

Nothing that Wahba did in those early years points in the direction of a career as a police officer, and nothing in his *Diary* explains why he joined the Police Academy upon finishing his secondary education. Asked about this once in a public meeting, he jocularly replied: "My father insisted. I must have been very naughty." This flagrant detour, however, was to prove a valuable asset in later years, providing Wahba with an almost inexhaustible store of images, anecdotes and characters.

The year he spent at the Menouf police station, a small provincial town north of Cairo, immediately after his graduation in 1949 was particularly lucrative: it formed the basis of Wahba's first play, *El-Mahrousa* (literally the God-protected), providing the material, the social model, the character types, the setting, atmosphere and total message, and continued to haunt his work, dramatic and otherwise, until the end of his days.

Wahba's career as a police officer was very short-lived, spanning only a few years. Back in Alexandria after his one year service in Menouf, he joined Alexandria university as a full-time student (despite his job duties) to read philosophy and got his degree in 1955. The same year he was transferred to Cairo and immediately made his way into *Rose al-Yusef* as a junior reporter on criminal matters. It did not seem an auspicious beginning, but it meant that he was back on track. He left the police officially in 1956, but he had "virtually stopped being a police officer a year and a half earlier," as he says. Then followed a period of intense literary and journalistic activity: in 1957 he founded the *Police Magazine* (Migallat Al-Police); the following year he launched a monthly literary publication, *Migallat Al-Shahr*, which continued until February 1962, and published his first collection of short stories called *Arzaq* (Dispensations). By 1960, Wahba had become acknowledged as a writer with revolutionary views and pronounced socialist leanings and was therefore accepted into state-run mainstream journalism and given the post of managing editor of the *Radio* (later *Radio and Television*) magazine. Indeed, a year earlier, when he was contributing a weekly political article to one of the papers issued by Al-Tahrir publishing house (he does not specify which), he had had it on good authority that President Nasser himself admired his political writings (*Diary*, 3, 126-127).

From journalism to the stage was a very short step in those days: both were regarded as political public forums. Indeed, literary activity and political activism are often indistinguishable in this period and seem like extensions of each other. More than any other genre, drama was regarded as the most effective in disseminating the new ideas and rallying the people to the revolutionary cause. Almost every writer worth his salt, including Naguib Mahfouz, attempted drama at least once in those days, and so did Wahba, who was more suited to the medium than most. *El-Mahrousa*, which opened the National's season in December 1961, directed by by Kamal Yaseen, was a great success with the audience and critics and marked the beginning of an intense dramatic career which spanned 20 years and produced in all 16 full-length and 18 one-act plays.

Viewed in its historical context, this rich dramatic output seems part of a general movement – started by No'man Ashour in the early fifties with plays like *The Magnet*, *The People Downstairs* and *The People Upstairs* – to rehabilitate both comedy and the vernacular and join them in a realistic form of drama at once popular and capable of serious political and social criticism. Unlike Ashour, however, Wahba refused to be bound by the conventional urban setting of traditional Egyptian comedy and opted in his first four plays (*El-Mahrousa*, 1961, *Kafr El-Battikh*, also directed by Kamal Yaseen, 1962, *Third Class*, directed by Sa'd Ardash, 1963, and *Mosquito Bridge*, directed by Kamal Yaseen 1964) for a rural one. More refreshing and interesting still was Wahba's dramaturgy which did away with plot, in the conventional sense, linear progression and main characters and replaced them with a cumulative, anecdotal type of structure which gradually builds up the setting and its inhabitants into a microcosm of Egyptian society and a metaphor for human oppression and frustration in general. In these plays, and many that followed, the stock situations, devices and

stereotypes of traditional comedy are deftly exploited and modified, while the bubbling surface humour of the dialogue betrays deep distress and an acute sense of crisis, and the realistic representation often gives way to caricature or grotesque absurdity.

After *Mosquito Bridge*, which featured a sad assortment of lost souls caught between two worlds and unable to make the transition or completely belong to either, Wahba left the world of the village behind him. His next, and most popular play, *Sikkat Al-Salamah* (*The Road to Safety*), directed by Sa'd Ardash for the National in 1965 and interpreted by many as a clear political warning to the regime which seemed at the time to have lost direction, is set in the desert where a group of travellers have lost their way. Very little happens in the play and the dramatic action consists of their varying and contrapuntally orchestrated reactions to the crisis and interactions with each other. More than in any of his other plays, the verbal texture here, which ranges from lyrical, confessional monologues to sharp, acerbic, comic repartee, reveals Wahba's stunning ability to generate poetry and create character, meaning, mood and atmosphere out of ordinary human speech.

In terms of mood, theme and linguistic patterning, Wahba's next play, *Stairwell* (also staged by Ardash at the Notional in 1966), forms, with *The Road to Safety* and *Mosquito Bridge*, a sombre and disturbing trilogy which communicates a sense of approaching doom. In all three, the basic situation features a group of lost souls trapped in a kind of wasteland and the central theme is waiting. Evoking the autumnal mood of Chekov's twilight world and the harsh aridity of Beckett-land, the trilogy chronicles Wahba's growing disillusionment with the regime and his deepeing anxiety and sense of despair.

The traumatic defeat in 1967 was paradoxically at once shattering and liberating. The worst had come to pass and that was cathartic: dramatists could now say openly what fear or hope of reform had led them to qualify or coach in dramatic metaphors. The result was more outspoken plays which, though valuable for morale-building and consciousness-raising, were sadly of only topical relevance and limited value. Wahba's *Nails* (staged by Sa'd Ardash at the National in 1968), *The Professor* (1969), and *Seven Waterwheels*, *Antar's Stable*, and *Lo and Behold, the Wall Has Spoken* (1970-71), belong to this category and mark Wahba's departure from the symbolic-realistic mode into a mode of historical fantasy with features from Brecht's epic theatre.

In the following year, however, he went back to realistic comedy and social satire, his real forte, producing in succession *Sad El-Hanak* (Gobstopper), 1972, *Sab' Walla Dhab'* (Any Luck?), 1973, and *Ras El-'ish* (Nest's Head), 1974, then a long string of one-act plays some of which were performed in triple-bills in 1978 and 1979. His last play was *Antar '83* in which he updated his earlier *Antar's Stable*.

Like most of his generation of writers, Wahba had his fair share of censorship and some of his plays, like *The Professor* (which had its first performance in 1980 though written in 1969), were completely suppressed at the time, while others, like *The Stairwell*, had to fight a ferocious battle to reach the stage. Away from the theatre too, his fearless sincerity and outspokenness won him many enemies, and in 1975 he found himself the subject of a slanderous smear campaign and was sacked from the ministry of culture where he had served in various important capacities and invested six years of his life (from 1969 to 1975) in the building and promotion of the mass culture apparatus. But Wahba was not the kind of person to take injustice lying down, and

after two years of fighting to clear his name he was reinstated. Three years later, he handed in his resignation and set out in search of broader stages and new roles. It was goodbye to drama.

Or was it? Perhaps it was goobye to only one kind of drama. During the last 17 years of his life, Wahba, as writer, twice member of the People's Assembly, head of the Egyptian Artists Unions, the Arab Artists Union and, finally (and tragically briefly), of the Egyptian Writers Union, continued to be a dashing, dynamic, charismatic figure and "trouble-maker", stirring many a stagnant pool and triggering many dramatic battles – artistic, cultural and political. In those last valuable years too, he devoted more attention to his second passion, the cinema. He had never stayed very far from it, even when he publicly seemed eternally wedded to the theatre. His work in the ministry of culture had brought him in close contact with the cinema industry, and off and on he wrote screen-plays, some of which rank among the most memorable in the history of Egyptian films. In the mid-eighties, after what he must have deemed a decent period of separation from the theatre, he decided to publicly announce cinema as his lawfully wedded wife in an international ceremony which came to be known as The Cairo International Film Festival. The wedding anniversary was punctually observed and celebrated every year, and this year, though Wahba has left us, is to be no exception. With his policeman's discipline, he made sure before he left that all the preparations had been made and everything was in order. After a gruelling radio-therapy spell in Paris, he refused to rest. The press conference in which he launched this year's festival was his last public appearance and a kind of public farewell. He went home, and the next afternoon he was dead. He simply slipped away while asleep. Perfect dramatic timing till the very end.

Sikkat Al-Salamah
Revived*

Odd that the first theatrical crop of the year 2000 to grace the boards should consist solely of revivals of old plays updated in a way that gives them a pronounced contemporary political relevance. In some cases the recycled product is sent to the market with the tag '2000' dangling at the end of the title. A prime example of this phenomenon and the first to start the trend is Mohamed Subhi's *Sikkat Al-Salamah, 2000*, adapted from Sa'deddin Wahba's 1965 hit, *The Road to Safety*, and turned into violent political propaganda against peace with Israel. I was told by one of the team of dramaturges who, with Subhi, masterminded this adaptation that it had been approved by Wahba before his death and got his blessing. This explains, in part, the new version's popular success, since it has kept the original's basic situation, character-configuration, earthy humour, and barbed satirical thrust.

In the 1965 text, a group of travellers on their way to Alexandria (for various purposes, all shady and reprehensible however, as the play eventually reveals) lose their way in the Western desert when one of the passengers, a writer and journalist whose destination is Marsa Matrouh, misleads the driver of the bus who is making his first trip on this route. In the grip of despair and the certainty of imminent death, the characters bare their souls, confess their sins (moral, social, and political) and repent. Wahba cleverly couches his political message in these revelations (some of them quite spicy, others, extremely hilarious), and

* 2 March 2000.

the gist of it is that the 1952 revolution, led by Nasser, a novice in politics like the hapless bus driver, has gone astray because of the corruption, selfishness and dishonesty of his companions — foremost among them the hypocritical, self-seeking intellectuals. Predictably (since the play is a comedy), the passengers are finally saved; predictably too, and quite ironically, their repentance and fervent decisions to reform evaporate at the first sign of rescue. The only exceptions are an ignorant third-rate actress-cum-prostitute, a vulgar actors' agent-cum-panderer, and an aberrant husband on his first extra-marital escapade.

Written two years before the cataclysmic 1967 military debacle (it was performed at the National in January 1965, directed by Sa'd Ardash), the play was eerily prophetic and those who watched it at the time dimly sensed it. It did not matter that the plot was hackneyed, that most of the characters were stereotypes rather than individualized human beings, and that the whole thing was a thinly-disguised political parable. Despite its witty dialogue and broad humour, it had a kind of urgency that vaguely suggested a feeling of approaching doom.

Now that the historical moment which gave the play back in 1965 its emotional vibrancy, impact and power has become a dim memory, a cynical narrative, or a cold collection of facts, what remains of *Sikkat Al-Salamah* and has saved it from oblivion are its most conventional aspects: the well-tried, ever-appealing suspenseful situation, the rising tension and inevitable bickering between the characters which sometimes explodes into deliciously funny slanging matches between the women, the sexual innuendoes which often extend to other biological functions, the punning on the agent's name, Qurani, which

literally means "horny", the spirited repartee, the secret rivalry between the men to gain the favours of sexy Susu, not to mention the sentimental presentation of the self-same Susu as the honest whore or virtuous prostitute of melodrama, and the vividly-drawn caricatures of familiar types, such as the *Omdah* (village mayor), the acrid, youth-clinging, aristocratic old spinster, the effeminate youth, the crooked lawyer, the vainglorious, philandering company chairman, ... etc.

A recording of the original 1965 production in black and white is frequently broadcast on T.V. and has maintained its popularity over decades. This is perhaps the reason Subhi hit upon it as a suitable vehicle for a different political message. He realized that it had lost its original political significance but could easily be recharged with another. All it takes is a simple geographical twist and the updating of the topical references and slangy expressions in the dialogue to suit the times. Sharm El-Sheikh and Taba replace Alexandria and Marsa Matrouh, and the bus is lost in Sinai, near the Israeli border, instead of the Western desert. The demented survivor of El-Alamein battle and self-appointed guard of the tombs of its victims in the original becomes in this version a deranged bedouin living among the mass-graves of Egyptian soldiers in Sinai. Whereas the former lost his mind when he killed his wife after watching her being raped by foreign soldiers, the latter goes mad after watching the brutalities of the Israeli agressor. When rescue comes in the form of an Israeli border-patrol, Subhi, in the role of Qurani, suddenly reforms and gains heroic stature; he delivers an impassioned harangue, reminding his hesitant companions of the old and bloody feud with Israel and urging them to refuse this form of rescue, even at the risk of death, since it will only lead them futher astray from the road to safety. As director of the show, Subhi

bolstered his loud message with film clips of famous massacres and other Israeli atrocities, ending with a rousing patriotic song chanted by all the cast. It was as if the show had suddenly taken a sharp turning, plunging headlong into agit-prop.

I have no quarrel with the message, warmongering as it struck me: it's a free country and everyone is entitled to his views; indeed it is the kind of message many would jubilantly embrace in the light of the recent bombing of Beirut and the regrettable deterioration of the peace process. Subhi is certainly lucky; those bombings couldn't have been better-timed to serve his purpose. They provided the ideal mental framework for the reception of his production and whipped up enough anger to blind the audience to the repulsive coarseness of many jokes and scenes, Simone's many illogical costume-changes, the simplistic sugar-coated-pill approach (Simone, her costumes, the *Omdah's* irrepressible bladder, the male-chauvinist jokes about women and homosexuals being part of the sugar), the high-handed, incontrovertible, pedagogic tone, and the startling switch to agit-prop at the end.

One would be a fool to complain of the abject absence of subtlety or any dialectical complexity of thought or feeling in an agit-prop show, especially one designed and directed by an artist who has publicly confessed on three occasions at least that his first passion is teaching, rather than acting or directing. (And in this show and his previous *Carmen*, Subhi has virtually, and effectively, turned the theatre into a classroom.) Nevertheless, I cannot help wondering, and I think it is legitimate to ask: if Subhi wanted to stage an agit-prop piece and lampoon the supporters of the peace process, particularly those who

have established contacts with pro-peace intellectuals in Israel, why didn't he and his dramaturges work on the whole play and recast it from beginning to end in the agit-prop form? Why go along with Wahba's original form and substance up until near the end, cashing in on its comfortable conventionality and popularity, then suddenly leave it behind? Or, indeed, why not write a whole new play and leave *Sikkat Al-Salamah* as people know it and love it in Ardash's 1965 production alone?

Mu'in Bessisou

1927-1984

Overtaken by History*

Two months ago, a bright-eyed young woman in a softly-coloured flowered shirt walked into my office at the Academy of Arts carrying a big black volume and placed it gently on my desk. I raised my head from the thick pile of abstruse official papers, reports and letters I had been trying to negotiate my way through for hours, all the while cursing the day I had the honour of being appointed dean thrust upon me despite my vehement candid protests that I was a hopeless administrator and completely out of my depth when it came to rules and regulations. I was glad of the interruption, asked her to sit down and ordered two coffees. I did not know what she wanted or what scholarly dilemma she came to lay at my door; but anything was infintely preferable to that grim, soulless pile on my desk.

"Intisar El-Shanti", she said, flashing a confident smile at me. It did not ring a bell, and noticing the blank look on my face she added, patting the thick, leather-bound volume, "the thesis ... Mu'in Bessisou. We spoke on the phone." Of course! She was that Palestinian student from Gaza who had rung up to ask if I would be willing to be on the board of examiners in the viva of her M.A. thesis on the plays of Bessisou. She had studied at The Institute of Arabic Studies founded in Cairo by the Arab League and worked on her thesis there under the supervision of prominent Arabic scholar Salah Fadl. The institute is renowned for its high academic standards and has on its teaching staff some of the most illustrious names in the field. The student before me looked and sounded both knowledgable and intelligent and the subject

* 12 October 2000.

was enticing; it would be a chance to revisit the firey dramatic world of Bessisou and reassess his art and political thought with the benefit of hindsight.

I was quite willing, I said; but since I was already devilishly busy and about to be hurled into the merciless vortex of the CIFET preparations, not to mention preparing for the new academic year entrance exams due at the beginning of September, it all depended on when she wanted to take her viva. "My scholarship ends in August and I have to be back in Gaza," she explained; but she could stay a week or two longer if it was absolutely necessary since she was keen to have me as examiner and thought we were kindred minds. "But, please, not beyond the middle of October," she disarmingly pleaded. A lot of her family would love to attend her viva, so would I please tell her as soon as I agreed on a date with her supervisor and the other examiners.

She was a very persuasive young lady and it was finally decided that her viva would take place on 10 October — Bessisou's birthday, though I did not realise it at the time! Her family were duly informed and for a few brief weeks their hard and cheerless existence, living literally next door to a Jewish settlement, was brightened by the prospect of the trip and the joyous occasion. But now, with Gaza and the West Bank plunged in bloody violence, and over 100 Palestinians killed by Israeli bullets, and the Gaza airoport closed, I seriously doubt that Intisar's viva, due in 3 days, will be witnessed by any of her relatives, and the prospective event has already taken on a completely different meaning.

I little thought as we planned for this peaceful scholarly affair that suddenly, as if by eerie design, the turbulent dramatic world of Mu'in Bessisou would jump off the pages of the dusty and long forgotten

volume of his collected plays I fished out of my library and uncannily materialize as a brutal, searing reality on the stage of the world.

Leisurely and detachedly perused in the shelter of the study, his six plays – *The Tragedy of Ché Guevara, Black Uprising, Samson and Delilah, The Rock, Sparrows Build Their Nests Between Toes and Fingers*, and *The Trial of Kalilah wa Dimnah* (collected in one volume published by Dar al-Awdah, Beirut, 1979) – could provoke you to speculate on the double nature of violence as both aggression and resistance, on the ideologically controversial issue of the status and viability of politically committed art, or the pervasive and seminal influence of Bertolt Brecht on modern Arab drama since the sixties. You may conclude that despite his skilful manipulation of the vast resources of the stage to body forth his ideas in vivid concrete theatrical metaphors, and his talent for forging startlingly fresh poetic imagery, his symbols, verbal and visual, are often too transparent, his tone occasionally far too loud and savagely bludgeoning, and his impassioned, raw portrayal of the Palestinian tragedy allows little room for complex characterization or profound inquiry into the paradoxes of human emotions. His plays have the colour of blood and the sound of thunder and seem designed to sweep you headlong on a tidal wave of pain and anger.

This was perhaps inevitable given Bessisou's firey spirit, wild, restless temperament and personal and national history. Born in Gaza on 10 October 1927 to a middle class, politically active family, his imagination as a child was fired by the story of his uncle, Qasem, who had been arrested and executed in Istanbul, in the early 1920s, for issuing a political, anti-Ottoman-rule publication called *Al-Muntada Al-Arabi*. At ten, Bessisou found his mother smuggling arms to the

Palestinian resistance against the British and his father risking his life on a dangerous trip to save one of its wounded leaders. But the really decisive experience in Bessisou's life and writing career was the 1948 *Nakba.* From that time on, and until his death in London, in 1984, writing for him could never be a matter of "recollection in tranquility". He was buried in Egypt where he had come to study in 1948, joining the department of literature at the American University, published his first collection of poetry, joined the communist party, was twice arrested and deported, appointed editor of a cultural section in *Al-Ahram* in 1969 (after splitting with the communists and making his peace with Nasser's regime), and had three of his plays (*Ché Guevara, Black Uprising* and *Samson and Delilah*) successfully performed between 1970 and 1971.

Bessisou's career as a playwright came to a virtual end when he left Cairo in 1972 to joint the active Palestinian resistance and put his pen in the service of the PLO, ghost-writing, with Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darweesh, many of Arafat's public speeches and letters to the occupied territories. The best known of those was Arafat's address to the United Nations in 1974 which opened with the sentence: "I come to you with an olive branch in one hand, a rifle in the other." Now that the olive branch, more than ever before, seems about to fade into an illusion, will the rifle ultimately gain the upper hand? Will the recent tragic events in Palestine give new credence the grim message of Bessisou's plays that blood will have blood, that the only road to justice, freedom and human dignity must lie through piles of corpses, mass graves and blood baths? Are we ultimately to believe with Byron that history is a game of mutual homicide and that humanity, like Keats's nature, is red in tooth and claw?

Yusef Idris

1927-1991

All The World's A Stage!*

"If we want a real Egyptian theatre, we should look for it in the streets, in the fairground, the popular shows and the complex ceremonies and rituals of birth, death and circumcision."

With those memorable words, Yusef Idris launched his campaign for a genuine Egyptian theatre in 1964, and with it his own personal quest for his individual identity as playwright. He was already a distinguished literary figure at the time and the most prominent short-story writer in the Arab world. He had also made his mark in the realm of drama, where he had ventured in 1956, and had three successful and critically acclaimed plays to his credit. Another writer would have rested happily on his laurels and continued to mine the same lucrative vein. Idris, however, was made of a different stuff — the stuff of great explorers and reckless adventurers. In a B.B.C. interview, recently re-broadcast, he admitted that whatever he did was motivated by the quest for originality which, with him, reached the pitch of fever.

To be different, however, was not the only urge which prompted Idris to break with his dramatic past and seek new directions. He was deeply dissatisfied with the form in which he worked. Increasingly, he came to realize that the constraints of the realistic formula he inherited from the pioneers of Egyptian literary drama, like No'man Ashour and Sa'deddin Wahba, were too crippling. Like Ionesco, he felt that the boxed stage where the actors pretended the audience did not exist and the audience was reduced to the humiliating status of a peeping Tom was both embarrassing and artificial; what is more, it was, he felt, at

* September 1991.

once alien and inimical to the Egyptian temperament which is intrinsically gregarious and tends to regard even the most private of experiences as communal property.

A brief look at the three plays he produced before 1964 clearly reveals the formal tensions of his struggle with the realistic well-made play. His first play, *Malek Al-Qutn*, or *The Cotton King* (produced in 1956 at the National theatre and directed by Nabil El-Alfi) is painfully static: the conflict between the farm- worker, Qamhawi (literally the corn-man) and Sunbati, the land-owner, does not grow or develop in any sense; it is bogged down in a clutter of superflous details seemingly intended to achieve verisimilitude. Embarrassingly, a hackneyed love-story between the farm-worker's son, Mohamed, and the land-owner's daughter, So'ad, is tacked on to provide the play with a romantic interest and, perhaps, infuse some life and zest into the dull proceedings. In scene after scene, we are bludgeoned with boring evidences of the injustice of feudal land-lords, and when you consider that this play was performed in the hey-day of socialism in Egypt, it would seem as if Idris was preaching to the converted. Not surprisingly, the play ends abruptly with a raging fire that consumes the bales of white gold. It was as if the good Lord himself, or Euripides's *deus ex machina*, had interfered to put a stop to the aimless wanderings of a misguided text.

Like all great artists, Yusef Idris was incapable of simplification and exclusion, and his wayward imagination, despite his scientific training in medicine, would seek the truth in the nooks and crannies of the human mind rather than in the straight and narrow paths of deductive logic. For him, reality consisted not in the conscious acts and

decisions we daily and calculatingly perform and take, but in the collective consciousness and the mysterious regions of dreams, folk memories and fantasy. In his second play, *Gomhoreyat Farahat*, or *Farahat's Republic*, or, rather, *Utopia* (directed by Fattuh Nashati, and performed in 1956, in a double-bill with *The Cotton King* at the National), he strayed fitfully into those regions, creating a stirring work which, despite its stifling traditional realistic formula, hung precariously and provocatively midway between reality and the dream, partaking of both and belonging to neither. P.C. Farahat, in his lonely police station, faced with a young political prisoner, and going through the barbarous investigation routines, is fitfully assailed by glimpses of Utopia. The gruelling contrast between what he gruffly says and horribly does and the urbane civility of his milk and honey dreams testifies to a deap-seated schizophrenic split. To the dungeons of the soul and its winding alleyways Idris was to return once more, but much later.

For some mysterious reason Idris went back to realism with a vengeance four years later as if quailing at the prospect of what Farahat might lead him to. *Al-Lahza Al-Harigah*, or *The Crucial Moment* followed in 1960, directed by Nur El-Dimirdash also at the National. The mental split and ailing soul were there, but heavily disguised. And once more the deep sense of embarrassment bedevilled the audience. The young hero, Sa'd (literally, good luck), is the hope of a humble middle-class family. When he volunteers to fight the agressors in the Canal zone in 1956, during the tripartite attack on Egypt, his father manages to lock him up in his room. But, lo, and behold! Sa'd, we discover at the end, was not really locked up! The door was open all the time, if he had cared to test it! But may be he was thankful it was locked, and the play strongly incites us to reach such a conclusion.

And, after all, who is to blame him? Idris always maintained that the key to the Egyptian character was coercion! Having experienced alienation in one's own homeland over centuries at the hands of foreign rulers, who would blame a young man if he did not feel he belonged and valued his own safety over the safety of his country. Indeed, Idris's last play, *The Acrobat*, echoes a similar sentiment when one of the major characters is made to say: "They all talk about Egypt. Our Mother! Where is this Egypt, I'd like to know?! Where is she?! Egypt should be my dignity. A cool drink on a hot summer day. A home. Respect."

Dignity is what all Idris's characters desperately pursue and rarely find. "To live in Egypt, you have to be an acrobat; and inside each one of us intellectuals there is a little rope-dancer lurking somewhere." Those were Idris's very words. And whether an acrobatic and clownish intellectual could respect himself and believe in what he says, let alone convince others of its veracity, is quite a riddle! Idris managed it though. And the way he did it was by completely relinquishing the realistic pretence on the stage in favour of open, undisguised theatricality, while, at the same time, frankly acknowledging the intrinsic element of play-acting which enters into all our dealings and social practices. At last, the intellectual could walk the stage as clown or acrobat to discuss the nature of the social and existential game imposed upon him as man and social being, and try to dismantle it or, at least, discredit it in the eyes of his companions for the evening.

With realism, Idris also renounced the traditional box-stage and closed theatre, opting for a form of theatre-in-the-round, with a freer, more fluid form of seating. Like the street-juggler, the circus-clown, or

the old story-teller, the actor would be ringed round by his audience, or, rather, co-players, on all sides. In three successive articles, published in *El-Migalah* magazine under the title "Towards an Egyptian Theatre" in 1964, Idris worked out his ideas. But knowing that the proof of the pudding was in the eating, he proceeded a few months later to put his ideas into practice. *El-Farafeer*, or *The Underlings*, was the result — a daring experiment that has since launched a stream of similar experiments.

Masters and servants was the theme, and Idris examined it from a variety of angles, expanding it all the time so that by the end it is made to embrace man's relation to fate and history as well. Equally cunning was the form he chose; it looks deceptively loose, with a series of farcical sketches, of an improvisational character, following each other with seeming haphazardness. The pieces, however, soon form an intricate pattern and are tightly harnessed together by the central metaphor of all the world as a stage. The author-director, God or fate, is frequently absent and gradually diminishes until he appears at the end as a swaddled babe. Farfoor, the prototype of Man and of the down-trodden, trampled-under Egyptian, is a professional clown who strays into the theatre by accident and is persuaded then coerced into playing the role of servant to the end of time. The master, on the other hand, is a member of the audience who is picked out randomly to play the part and doggedly sticks to it throughout. As the play develops, he comes to embody both the blind force of history and all the unjust and irrational social systems. Both master and servant, however, are in the final analysis victims of the absent author and prisoners in his infernal script. What starts as a game ends as a tragical farce in the manner of Beckett. And, indeed, the shadows of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon

and their absent Godot are never very far from Farfoor, his master and their absent author.

Looking back at *The Underlings* after nearly twenty-five years, what strikes one most about it is not only its enduring freshness and appeal or its specific 'Egyptianness', but, rather, its universal character. It is as if by digging deep into the history of Egyptian popular entertainment and social ritual, Idris has managed, somewhat unconsciously, to tap the vital resources of other folk traditions and ancient theatrical practices. No wonder the play carries strong reminders of the *Commedia dell'arte* and its Farfoor bears a close resemblance to the crafty servant of Roman comedy, to both the "Vice" and the "Everyman" of the middle ages, as well as to the wise Shakespearean Fool and the Italian Harlequin.

Curiously, Idris did not repeat this experiment, despite its wide fame and popularity, until about twenty-years later. May be he was disappointed it was staged by Karam Metaweh at the National rather than at a circus or a marquee in an open square, as he had urged, or perhaps he was sickened by the glut of imitative plays his experiment spawned, and may be his restless search for originality and innovation would not let him do the same thing twice. A pity, since his next two experiments fall short of the aims he set for himself.

Al-Mahzala Al-Ardiyya, or *World Farce* (directed by Kamal Yaseen 1965-1966) is a daringly ambitious text, but also a deeply muddled one. Adapted from one of his short stories called *Beyond the Bounds of Reason*, Idris hoped in it to bring to the stage the mental, psychological and political preoccupations of his day and pen down a dramatic chronicle of an age of social and intellectual turbulence and topsyturvy values. Inspired by Elmer Rice's *Adding Machine*, he chose an

expressionistic form and set his play in a psychiatric clinic guarded over by a male-nurse called "Sifr", after Rice's Mr. Zero. As the patients file in, all having the same name, Mohamed, but different numbers, and all brothers, but representing different ideological orientations, and all claiming to be married to the same woman – the mysterious "Nunu" – the play begins to take off into the world of fantasy. It is all taking place inside the head of the psychiatrist, we tentatively surmise, and perhaps the patients are all projections of his feverish mind. What the play is all about after that is anybody's guess. Many critics opt for a political interpretation, seeing the play as a cynical parable that mocks the historical transition from feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism, equalizing the three. Such an interpretation, however, though plausible, is not completely satisfactory. Unlike *The Underlings*, the pattern here, if there is one, is terribly opaque and fragmented. You glimpse it in flashes, but it soon dissolves in the clutter of ideas and eddying pools of turgid dialogue. What the play needs is a director to tidy it up as Karam Metaweh tidied *El-Farafeer* earlier, ruthlessly cutting one whole act, an act which Idris later developed and made into the *World Farce*!

After an interval of three years, *El-Mukhatateen* (which means at once The Conspirators and The Striped Ones) followed. A straight forward saucy political satire in the expressionistic vein and Nasser's totalitarian regime, it was at once less muddled and far poorer than the previous play. It did, however, incense the government at the time and was banned from public performance in 1971, on the night it was scheduled to open in a production by Sa'd Ardash. The ban was not lifted until 1982 when director Ahmed Zaki was allowed to stage it at El-Tali'a theatre in a production by the Mass Culture Organisation. But despite its political reputation, the production received only a modest success with the public and the critics.

The banning of *El-Mukhatateen* in 1971 yielded one bonus, however. It encouraged Idris to venture once more into the realm of fantasy, if only to escape the watchful eye of the censor. *Al Gins Al-Talet* (*The Third Sex*) harks back to Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* and *Women in Parliament*, as well to Lutfi El-Kholi's 1964 play, *Al-Araneb* (Rabbits). In the former two, women rebel politically and manage to overthrow the rule of men; in the latter, El-Kholi – a progressive, leftwing writer and activist – debates the possibility of using science to allow males and females to switch sexes at will and, therefore, abolish the biological differences between them which are used by society as an excuse for gender discrimination and female oppression. In *The Third Sex*, however, Idris goes beyond the idea of role-switching and the battle of the sexes to explore, in the context of a mythical Utopia, a new proposition: to combine the best in the two sexes in a new, ideal creature – a kind of Nietzschean "Superman".

The Third Sex was directed by Sa'd Ardash the same year *El-Mukhatateen* was banned and performed with a good cast led by Abdel-Rahman Abu Zahra as Adam, the scientist dreaming of the third sex, Mohsena Tawfiq, as the legendary scientist who possesses the secret of it, and Magda El-Khatib as the embodiment of this new, amalgamated ideal being. The production, however, proved too abstract, esoteric and philosophical for the public whose taste was predominantly for social, realistic comedy. This, together with the banning of *El-Mukhatateen* put Idris off drama for a long while. It was not until 1988 that he broke his dramatic silence with a new play, which was to be his last, and, as such, a brilliant swan song.

In *Al-Bahlawan* (The Acrobat-cum-Clown) Idris recovered something of the vivacious spirit of *El-Farafeer*, its daring innovativeness and theatrical zest. The central unifying metaphor this time was not the stage but, rather, the circus, and he designed the play to be performed in a real circus tent with real clowns. The hero – a journalist and also, secretly, a part-time circus acrobat and clown – embodies in a vivid and bitter theatrical metaphor Idris's own history in dealing with the political establishment since the 1940s. No wonder the hero opts out of the 'balancing' game at the end and casts off all his compromising social masks to recover his real human face which turns out, paradoxically, to be the theatrical mask of the clown. Watching the play (which was unfortunately staged by Adel Hashim at The National Theatre in 1988 and not at The National Circus as the author desired) one could not help thinking that this schizophrenic acrobatic intellectual of the eighties was the natural heir and, perhaps, inevitable progeny of the oppressed intellectual clown of the sixties. Ironically, both were wrenched out of their natural habitat in the marquee and the circus and forcibly consigned to a respectable traditional Italian-box theatre. One wonders if more clowns would have followed! Sadly, however, Idris, like his last hero, has decided to opt out of the grand circus of life.

Alfred Farag

1929 - ....

Old Wine in New Bottles:*

Al-Zir Salim

For the opening of its much delayed winter season, the National theatre chose *Al-Zir Salim*, a play of the sixties by the prominent Egyptian playwright Alfred Farag.

Farag is particularly known for his many incursions into the world of folk literature and history. In three of his plays he uses ancient and modern history (*The Fall of a Pharoah*, 1957, *Sulayman of Aleppo*, 1965, and *Fire and the Olive Branch*, 1970), and in four (*The Barber of Baghdad*, 1964, *Al-Zir Salim*, 1967, *Ali Janah Al-Tabrizi and his Servant Quffah*, 1968 and *Epistles of the Judge of Seville*, 1978) he draws upon popular narratives such as oral tales, *The Arabian Nights*, the *Belles Lettres* of the great Abbasid writer Al-Jahiz and the folk epic about the life and exploits of Al-Zir Salim, prince, poet, butcher, mad idealist and debauched womanizer, to name but some of his facets.

Farag's attitude to tradition is far from acquiescent; it is one of deep and searching critical questioning rather than complacent endorsement. This attitude informs *Al-Zir Salim* and is translated into a dramatic structure where the tragic history of Salim and the turbulent past of bloody strife and inter-tribal feuds, of bigotry and intolerance, masquerading as idealistic moral quests, is conjured up, with all its primitive savage passions, and subjected to the cool and honest gaze of reason.

* 15 December 1990.

The past, spanning 17 years, unrolls in the play in quick short scenes, unfolding a series of related revenge schemes with enough corpses to satisfy the most bloody-minded and sensational Elizabethan writer. This gory drama is presented not as a flashback or a haunting memory, but as a conscious reenactment of the past by the people who bore its brunt in response to the urgent inquiries of the long-absent Hagras. Hagras, the lawful heir to the throne of the Arabs and the symbol of a new rational and enlightened order, plays the role of a Brechtian chorus and represents at once the author and the audience on the stage. Significantly, he was brought up far away at the top of a mountain where he learnt wisdom in the court, and at the hands of a prince by the name of Munjid, in Arabic, "rescuer" or "the giver of succour".

The play begins with the rejection of tradition rendered as Hagras's refusal to accept his inheritance and mount the bloody throne which has caused the violent death of so many of his kinsmen, and ends with his acceptance of the burden of rule, in a spirit of near martyrdom, in order to guide his people to reason, peace and unity. And between the beginning and the end, history is replayed as a play-within-the-play and revealed as a shambles. The drama of the past which forms the tragic core of the play, with Salim as tragic hero, carries strong verbal and formal echoes from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Electra* and *Antigone*, as if to generalize it into the sphere of all tragedy, and is framed and regulated by the carefully orchestrated transitions from the past to the present, and from emotive acting to epic questioning and comment. The result is that we are never allowed to enter completely into the spirit of tragedy and are forced to maintain, as it were, a double perspective or, rather, our distance from the events to examine them thoughtfully.

Anyone familiar with the work of Alfred Farag cannot fail to realize his indebtedness to the epic theatre of Brecht. In this play, however, the most Brechtian of all, he managed to indulge his love for Shakespeare and the Greeks, and their rare fusion of poetry and brutality, without sacrificing his progressive anti-tragic leftist stance. He skilfully manages the transition from Shakespeare and the Greeks to Brecht so that the interplay of tragic and epic scenes serves to underscore and enhance the passion and poetry of the one and the rationality and historical sense of the other – a delicate balance which Brecht himself strove for and at his best attained.

This delicate balance makes the play one of the most taxing in production. I have seen it twice performed this year in the provinces and experienced the agony of watching it disintegrate and splinter into incoherent fragments with violent irreconcilable changes of mood and message. Both times I had the impression that I was watching two unrelated plays: one cloyingly tragic and heavily derivative, with the ranting hero, Salim, demanding his murdered brother back alive and slaughtering thousands in the name of justice, and the other ponderously and dryly didactic, with Hagras assuming the boring role of preacher. The final effect was of a text with a crack in the middle that cried out for cohesion – a text that strove alternately for the epic and the tragic but made a travesty of both.

In the present National Theatre production, however, veteran director Hamdi Gheith, finally dredging himself out of a long despondency, adroitly avoids that pitfall and achieves coherence of tone and mood and formal integrity – the perfect blend of thought and feeling. The rapid flow of the scenes, their strong visual impact,

heightened by the sets and costumes of Mona Badrawi, and the sensitive movement, together with good acting from a harmonious ensemble and effective, unobtrusive lighting made the show a real treat. It seems that in drama, as in wine, ripeness is all.

Roguish Elegance:*
The Love Life of Atwa Abu Matwa

With the summer season nearly at its end and the 5th Experimental Theatre Festival knocking urgently at the door, the National theatre has finally decided to shake off the dust of months of total inertia and put up its lights. For its much delayed season it chose for an opening an enticing enough production with a strong commercial pull: a musical comedy, based on a script by Alfred Farag, with lyrics by Bahaa Jaheen, music by Ali Sa'd and directed by the evergreen Sa'd Ardash. Of dancing, there is plenty, 'belly' and otherwise, choreographed by Abdel-Mon'im Kamel and Magdi Saber; and with Sikeena Mohamed Ali's lighting and elegant sets, plus a popular film star in the title role, *The Love Life of Atwa Abu Matwa* seems set to become a great commercial hit.

Alfred Farag, who lately has had many honours thrust upon him, including a top state award and a major Arab one, is known to derive most of his themes and characters from popular literature, be it *The Arabian Nights*, the *Maqamat*, the popular epics and the history of the Pharaohs or of the tribal wars among the Arabs. In his drama, too, one finds strong intimations of long acquaintance with the world of Western classics, particularly the Greeks and Shakespeare whom he regards as popular rather than high-brow. In conversation, he always grumbles about the division of art into 'high' and 'low', 'serious' and 'popular', and claims that it has wreaked havoc on the Egyptian theatre. "I write for the people, not for the critics or an intellectual elite," he once said to

* 12 August 1993.

defend his single, short-lived foray into the commerical theatre with a musical adaptation of *Ali Janah Al-Tabrizi* (one of his masterpieces). He did not repeat the experience, perhaps because he realised that the 'people' he is after can never afford the tickets of the private companies.

With such a background and such leanings, it was logical that he should turn to the National, where he scored his earliest popular success in the sixties with the *Barber of Baghdad*, and seek to enliven its heavy and sedate atmosphere with a rambunctious satire on low and high life. And where better to go for inspiration than to John Gay's rogues and beggars?! It is indeed surprising that Farag (who studied English literature as an undergraduate) did not attempt an adaptation of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* earlier. It may be that Naguib Sorour, a poet and playwright, beat him to it with an Egyptian version of Bertolt Brecht's modern reworking of Gay's 18th century text.

Sorour's version of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, under the title *King of the Beggars*, was a hit in the sixties and has remained a success to this day. Only last week it was playing at the Floating theatre in Giza, performed by a visiting troupe from Alexandria, and not a few years pass without a revival.

Compared to Sorour's, Farag's knaves and beggars seem infinitely more suave and urbane, with none of the former's roughness and virulent invective or coarse language. It is as if they have been dipped in "the milk of human kindness" or, rather, into the glamorous aura of American gangster films. Indeed, at many points in the show my eyes wandered down to their feet to see if they were not wearing the famous spats. And here we come to the crux of the matter.

Sitting in the front row, within three metres of the stage, and watching the charming and scintillating Yehya El-Fakharani, the fey and whimsical Abla Kamel and the bubbling Mohamed Abul Enein, I wondered at the immense distance of the view. It all looked so cool and detached and faraway, with no possible link with the world outside the theatre: Ataba Square and the Cairo of the nineties. I would have revelled in a nostalgic retreat to a Cairo that, possibly, never was. But despite El-Razzaz's slides on the back screen, the many points of contact the actors established with the audience, and the wonderful evocation of the style of belly-dancing in the thirties by Hala El-Naggar, the irritating thing was that the actors kept harping on the present, striving hard after a degree of relevance.

Is it that elegance has become so alien to us? That anything resembling sophistication will necessarily strike us as foreign? Is it that the text and direction went different ways? That the production stopped short of realising its identity as a light musical, a satirical or balladic comedy, and strove after something the form itself could not accommodate? And why is the first act so brisk and frothy and the latter, in large, so stodgy?

Still, if you bypass the message that we are all rogues and thieves, God forgive Alfred Farag, you can still enjoy the show. El-Fakharani is an inspiration and Abla Kamel a subtle witch; Abul-Enein is the nicest beggar in town and Hala El-Naggar is a wizard of oriental dancing. By any Egyptian standards, the show is the best in town right now. As always, Ardash sets the standard, however bad the times. And finally, as the beggar at the end of Gay's play said: "Through the whole piece you may observe such a similitude of manners in high and low life, that

it is difficult to determine whether ... the fine gentlemen imitate the gentlemen of the road, or the gentlemen of the road, the fine gentlemen."

Fleurs du mal:*

The Good and the Bad

For many years the majority of resident actors in the state-theatre companies have been bitterly complaining of un-or-under-employment. Many have not worked in their companies for years and have had to supplement their meagre salaries by work outside, mostly in radio and occasionally in television. The lucky few who are sporadically allowed to tread the boards often do so in minor, insignificant parts that give them little satisfaction and make no impact. The fact that the annual output of state productions has drastically diminished over the years is no doubt partly responsible for this sad waste of good talent. Equally responsible, however, has been the rabidly increasing commercial drive of the state theatre. This has resulted in a string or, rather, a thin trickle of spectacular, light musical comedies built round a star (whose fat contract eats up most of the budget) and quite indistinguishable from the usual fare you get at most of the commercial companies. Inevitably, and quite predictably, ticket-pices had to be raised to cope with the new inflated costs and became prohibitive to most students, young people and a vast section of the population. Ironically, we have ended up with two types of commercial companies: one run by private citizens who fund it out of their own pockets and accept all the risks involved; and the other run by the state and funded out of the tax-payer's money for the benefit of the rich and well-to-do.

In the public discussion over the future of the Egyptian theatre, held at the last International Book Fair, this absurdly paradoxical situation

* 12 March 1998.

was made abundantly clear. Most of the questions and comments received by the panel had to do with the prices of admission and the type and quality of the shows on offer whether at the private or state theatres. One young person sardonically wondered if dancing had become *obbligato* in theatre; another bemoaned the dismal lack of variety and the complete disappearance of the classics of world drama; many candidly admitted that their only acquaintance with theatre was through what was broadcast on television and what is written about it in the papers. Ironically, as playwright Lenin El-Ramly (who has his own company) pointed out, the state, rather than encourage the private theatres to raise their standards, expand their dramatic range, and cater to different tastes and audiences by offering subsidies or tax-reliefs, has viciously decided to put them out of business by providing precisely the same kind of entertainment and targeting the same audience. In corroboration, director Sa'd Ardash cynically added that in the past novels were sometimes adapted for the stage; but nowadays it has become not just fashionable but almost mandatory to adapt plays originally written for the stage to make them into variety shows or extravaganzas.

The consistent response of the state-theatre organisation to the repeated outcries of the critics and the public has been: if you do not like it, you can lump it. Even though the concept of theatre as a cultural service and not a commercial enterprise which originally informed this huge governmental apparatus has long been dead and buried, as many of its successive heads have candidly (though privately) admitted, it still remains with us like the bloated, expanding corpse in Ionesco's *Amedée ou Comment s'en debarrasser (Amedée, of How to Get Rid of It).*

It was bad enough to find the current head of the organisation (an honest, upright man and distinguished literary critic) publicly defending his 'starist' policy two weeks ago and boasting about box-office returns (the new criterion of value and success); but it was even worse and more disheartening to learn that even distinguished playwrights like Alfred Farag could not withstand the commercial tide and had succumbed to market pressures.

The Good and the Bad (Farag's 27th play, published by Dar El-Hilal, August 1994) was originally written in Farag's inimitable brand of classical Arabic - an innovative blend of classical and colloquial syntactical and tonal variations, inspired by and reminiscent of the language of *The Arabian Nights* and other folk narratives. He used it with great success in 1964 in *The Barber of Baghdad*, the first of five comedies he based on stories from *The Nights*. The last of these was *The Good and the Bad* and, in print, it is equal in grace, charm and humour even to *The Barber*. The story is simple enough: it pits the crafty, unconscionable dyer, Bakeer, against his kind, innocent neighbour, the barber, Baseer, and the action, which consists of a series of humourous adventures and hilarious scrapes, involving shipwrecks and miraculous escapes, is propelled and held together by the good barber's obsessive, almost fanatical desire to reform his friend and save his soul, and the equally tenacious determination of the incorrigible dyer to hold on to his wickedness and avoid any such fate. As the play progresses, the initial moral definitions of both characters are seriously questioned until they finally explode. And the wonderful thing is that both characters remain charming and quite sympathetic until the end.

No one can accuse *The Good and the Bad* of being abstruse, highbrow or in any way inaccessible. Like all of Farag's work, it is highly theatrical and belongs solidly in the tradition of popular theatre. And yet, its language was deemed by some (who undoubtedly must think that the average Egyptian spectator has a brain the size of a chicken's) as too difficult and off-putting. Accordingly, Farag was asked to rewrite the play in the Cairene vernacular and, shockingly, he complied. But the lovely original dialogue, with its subtle, delicious flavour, was not the only thing to go; with it went the songs, which Farag had written into the text, to be replaced by others from the pen of a colloquial poet.

The play I saw at Al-Salam seemed a pale and soulless immitation of the one I had read. The characters were the same, as were the episodes, the content of the dialogue and the basic ideas. Even the stage-directions concerning the set and the places for the songs and dances were faithfully followed by director Ahmed Abdel Halim. But something was sadly missing – call it the spirit of the work – and nothing, not even the beauty of Sawsan Badr (as the barber's wife), the live music of Ali Sa'd, or the riveting, charismatic presence of Yehya El-Fakharani as the dyer could make up for what the play had lost in the re-writing.

The Good and the Bad may be a commercial success as the head of the state-theatre organisation proudly boasted; but it is the kind of success one has to buy at a tremendous cost in terms of artistic integrity.

Over the Rainbow:*

Ali Janah Al-Tabrizi and His Servant, Quffah

In real life, playwright Alfred Farag is never so delightful as when he gets het up about the current condition of the Egyptian theatre – which frequently happens in the meetings of the theatre committee of the Supreme Council for Culture. On such occasions, he scowls ominously, bends forward, resting one elbow on the table, and shaking a warning forefinger at his audience embarks on a long, impassioned harangue that most members have come to know by heart. Unfailingly the tirade ends with a comparison with the London stage, and it is at this moment that Farag, who has a flat in London where he spends a few months every year regaling himself with the choicest shows on offer, treats us to a tantalizing description of the last London theatre season. If you interrupt him, reminding him of the unfairness of the comparison and that we are merely a consultative committee with no executive power and, therefore, utterly helpless, Farag pauses for a second, in seeming bewilderment, then flashes at you his famous Naguib El-Rihani grin and breaks into soft, quiet laughter.

In these routine tirades, a recurrent theme is the absence of the repertory system and its disastrous consequences. "It's inconceivable," he endlessly protests, "that a play should be laid to rest after only one production; the dramatic heritage of the golden 1960's," he moans, "is being shamefully neglected and is practically unknown to the younger generation." When a commercial theatre company decided a few years ago to go respectable and revive his 1960s hit, *Ali Janah Al-Tabrizi and*

* 13 February 2003.

his Servant Quffah, the first thing they wanted was to change the dialogue into the Egyptian dialect on the plea that their prospective audiences had no stomach for classical Arabic. Farag hadn't minded that they wanted to add songs, since they intended to make it into a musical; he had never conceded the artificial division of drama into high and low, popular and elitist, and always believed that, like Shakespeare (the writer who, with Brecht and the classical Greeks, most influenced his work), great dramatists should be able to address the most sophisticated, as well as the ignorant and illiterate among the audience. If turning the play into a musical would draw more spectators, all the better — so long as he himself penned the lyrics.

But changing the dialogue was a different matter and bitterly galling. Before he was driven by political harassment into voluntary exile for nearly fifteen years, Farag's reputation as a brilliant innovator had rested not only on his technical virtuosity, original wit, or imaginative use of history, folk literature, and other traditional sources, but also on his ingenious mating of Egyptian and classical Arabic. Like Tawfiq El-Hakim, whose influence he gratefully acknowledges, he aimed for a 'third language' that would combine the best of both, keep a formal distance from the language of daily life, avoiding its banalities and hackneyed cliches, and yet preserve its lively rhythms and vivid idiom. More than anything, such a language was essential for his dramatic project which, in his own words, aimed at "reshaping life via the reshaping of tradition."

With a few exceptions, all his major plays are set in the past, whether historical or imaginary. But however distant the fictional or actual temporal context, they never sound alien and never seem to date.

What links them firmly to the present, keeps them fresh and gives them perennial relevance and appeal, is this curious, effervescent linguistic blend which makes vivid characterisation and lively situations possible and works to displace both the present and the past, allowing you to stand back a little from the one to reflect upon it and see it in a different perspective, and drawing you close enough to the other to enable you to see through the aura of nostalgia and reverence and read it more accurately.

After his first known play, *The Voice of Egypt* – a loud, topical, patriotic piece which won him a state prize from the supreme arts council in 1956 – he tried his hand at tragedy with a play in classical Arabic on the rise and fall of Akhenaton. But, already, in *The Fall of a Pharaoh* (directed for the National by Hamdi Gheith in 1957), one feels Farag struggling to forge his own dramatic and linguistic idiom. In this respect, his five-year term as political prisoner (from 1959 to 1964) was a blessing in disguise. He had time to reflect on matters of dramatic structure and dialogue and dive deep into the rich store of the folk and popular heritage, discovering the enduring charm and wisdom of such narratives as *The Arabian Nights*, the love stories in *Al-Mahasin wa Al-Addad* (Pros and Cons) by the great Abbasid writer Al-Jahiz, and the popular epic of *Al-Zir Salim*, among others. The outcome of those years of forced solitude was his first masterpiece, *The Barber of Baghdad.*

Consisting of two separate love stories, one from *The Arabian Nights* and the other from *Al-Mahasin*, with the inquisitive barber, the setting in Baghdad and, of course, the theme of love as links, and written in that wonderful blend of classical and colloquial Arabic, with

plenty of wit and humour, it was original in almost every respect. Within months of his release from prison it was staged at the National with popular comedian Abdel-Mon'im Ibrahim in the title-role – a curious fact it would seem, unless you knew that it was the policy of the regime then to reinstate writers in a big way as soon as they were deemed sufficiently chastised. The production was a roaring success and won the highest critical acclaim. Once and for all, Farag was established as one of the master-builders of modern Egyptian drama.

Farag was bewitched by Ibrahim's comic talent and his lovable, ebullient stage-presence and wanted to do another play for him. It was largely under the spell of that great comedian that he revisited Baghdad and *The Nights*, coming back a few years later with *Ali Janah Al-Tabrizi and his Servant Quffah*. For material, he used three tales from *The Nights* with a common theme: the power of illusion. "The Imaginary Table" is about a rich man playing a practical joke on an importunate guest, inviting him to an imaginary table which he insists he takes for real; "The Sack" features two deranged men fighting over the ownership of a sack which they believe contains the whole world whereas in fact it holds nothing but an olive and a crust of bread; and in "Ma'roof the Cobbler", the destitute hero, who is about to starve in a strange city, masquerades as a man of immense wealth waiting for his caravan to arrive and manages to live luxuriously for a while on the gifts and money showered on him by the greedy merchants who covet his wealth and favour and even to marry the king's daughter.

Baghdad and *The Nights*, however, were not the only sources. For the characters of Ali and Quffah, Farag drew on a long stage tradition of crafty, clownish, down-to-earth and worldly wise servants and foolish, dreamy or harebrained masters – a tradition which stretches back to the

Romans, progressing through Shakespeare and Cervantes, down to Brecht's *Mr. Puntila and his Hired Man, Matti* and Yusef Idris's 1964 ground-breaking *El-Farafeer* (The Underlings). Like a picaresque novel or, indeed, all folk narratives, including *The Nights*, or Brecht's episodic epic structure, the play has no plot in the traditional sense of spiraling events joined together by the logic of cause and effect. Rather, it consists of a series of self-contained episodes, linked together only by the two main characters who embody a central idea or quest, and achieves its effect through variation, diversion and accumulation rather than logical progression.

The power of illusion was the link Farag detected between the three stories; he therefore made it the thematic axis of the drama, using the story of the table, in the first act, to explore the negative, escapist, compensatory aspects of the theme, and the story of the cobbler, in the second act, to display its positive side as a reformer's or visionary's dream of Utopia, or the artist's creative, prophetic imagination. This basic design provided the two eponymous heroes linking the stories with room to grow as characters. The development of Ali from a languid, whimsical, lackadaisical wastrel, who dissipates his fortune and takes refuge in illusions, into a frugal person, a social reformer, and a kind of Robin Hood who cheats the rich out of their money to share it out among the poor, is anticipated in the story of the sack which serves as an interlude between the two acts. The olive and crust of bread which the sack holds, and which are taken by the two men in their delusions to represent the whole world, surface prominently in the second act, in Ali's meals and his talk. Farag cultivates them as symbols of what is most essential and constructive in life and uses them to underline the change in Ali's character.

Quffah, on the other hand, the poor and thrifty itinerant cobbler or shoemaker, who comes begging at Ali's door and in a mad moment surrenders to his charm, accepts a change of name and profession and follows him as his servant on a long journey to China, remains essentially the same throughout – a cowardly, earth-bound rogue, greedy and occasionally mean-spirited. He, therefore, fails to grasp the change in his master and how the fictitious story of the caravan loaded with splendid treasures – a lie they cooked up together – has turned in his mind into a symbol of deliverance, a cherished dream of some future Utopia. Despite the strong emotional tie that grows between them, master and servant seem to be talking at cross-purposes all the time. Quffah's mounting frustration arouses both sympathy and affectionate laughter and the consistent counterpointing of the two characters, through which the meaning of the play evolves, is a constant source of hilarious comedy.

To get this delightful gem of a play back on stage, Farag was willing to make painful compromises. He is one of those writers who believe that plays are written to be performed, not perused in the quiet of the study; and with so many years away from the stage, he was sorely missing the enchanting game of theatre, the bustle of rehearsals, the flamboyant presence of players and the stimulating applause of audiences. Reluctantly, he changed the dialogue into colloquial Arabic and gave the play a happy end, making the imaginary caravan miraculously materialize to reinstate Ali and Quffah in the favour of the city. Ironically, the new production was a flop and closed down after only two weeks to cut losses. Unfortunately, I didn't catch it and cannot tell you what went wrong; but something certainly did. Licking his wounds, Farag sought out director Hana' Abdel-Fattah, whose

talent he deeply respects, and took him with the new version, retitled *Etnien fi Quffah* (Two in a Basket), to the National – nowadays, even the National shies away from anything remotely resembling classical Arabic. For some mysterious reason though, they didn't want Abdel-Fattah and suggested another director. Farag refused and stuck to his guns. No more concessions this time. After two years of wrangling and fruitless intercessions, the project was finally dropped.

Fortunately for Farag, the play and its lovers, Abdel-Fattah found a more congenial place to stage it – the AUC new Falaki Chambre Theatre – and a wonderful cast of young, gifted, keen performers from among the students and graduates of the Performing Arts Department there. (Once more the AUC was to prove more solicitous of our dramatic treasures than the state theatre companies.) I had watched the original production which starred Abdel-Mon'im Ibrahim as Quffah and Abu Bakr Izzat as Ali and didn't think any other duo could match their performance or come within a mile of it. However, half way through the first act, I began to wonder if I could be wrong, and within fifteen minutes of the second, I was sure those two young men could proudly hold their own in any comparison with the old masters.

Under the direction of Abdel-Fattah, who is known to bring out the best in actors, Tamer Mahdi (also a promising playwright and director) as Ali and Yehya El-Diqin as Quffah gave taut, finely detailed and subtly shadowed performances, always keeping the tempo in line with the mood and using physical posture, gesture, movement, and facial expression as well as vocal tone, pitch and inflection to spell out the richly paradoxical tie that binds master and servant and to play up their contrasting mental and psychological aspects. The rest of the acting,

including the chorus of beggars, was deliberately simplified and exaggerated, in the manner of caricature, to suggest the stock figures of fairytale and offset the reality of Ali and Quffah. In some isntances, however, notably Magdi El-Desouki's King, Amna Farahat as the Princess and Sherif Farahat as the Vizier, the actors managed to sidestep the stereotypes they were cast in and come alive as vivid, individualized characters.

Abdel-Fattah's directorial conception obviously took its inspiration from the puppet show, the shadow play, the art of clowns and street mimes, as well as children's illustrated books of fairytales. The sets (by Hazem Shebl) were brightly coloured and childishly simple, made up of painted, cutout cardboard trees, a bead curtain and two white cloth ones, framing an arabesque panel, satin-covered boxes for seats, a few cushions, two simple traders counters and a small cupboard for the king and vizier to hide in while the princess sounds Ali about his caravan. The actors were artificially made-up (by Dina El-Sheikh) and costumed (by Samir Shaheen) to look like marionettes, with lots of frills and puffs, pointed shoes and hats and big, baggy trousers, made of rubber-like material, in which they seemed to swim. But there were real puppets too (designed by Wisam Adel): the performance is announced and introduced to the audience by a flat puppet on a stick from behind a screen, in the manner of a shadow play, and when Quffah becomes drunk in the second act, he airs his anger and frustration through a glove puppet in the shape of the traditional Egyptian Qaraqoz.

The open theatrical design of the performance, the semi-circular shape of the acting space and the seating of the audience close, on three sides, together with the presence of a live oriental band throughout

allowed for a lively interaction between performers, audience and musicians. This generated a sense of community and the relaxed, festive atmosphere typical of communal celebrations and some of the old, traditional forms of popular entertainment. Mohamed Zanati's lyrics, Hatem Izzat's music, Mustafa Mu'nis's choreography, and the clever mime scenes performed by one of the beggars in the market-place were an added bonus; they effected a startling, hilarious change in the chorus of beggars, breaking the traditional, sentimental image, and projecting them, despite their tattered, patchwork gowns, as vigorous, variegated and comically aggressive. Another bonus was the scene in which Quffah goes to the king to betray Ali; here, Abdel-Fattah superimposed on the straightforward dialogue an alien mode of physical and vocal delivery, masterfully performed by the actors, which made the scene into a grotesque travesty of a tough political interrogation in a police-state. The hysterical laughter this scene triggered was a sure sign that the performance had reached over from the world of fantasy into the world of reality and touched a sore point there. This is the reason, perhaps, why the arrival of the caravan (and symbolically of Ali's craved Utopia) at the end, signalled by clouds of smoke billowing into the hall through the door, struck a false note and seemed, at best, ironical. Utopia is still far ahead and out of sight, and Farag cannot still get the original, 1969 version of the play performed at any professional theatre.

Salah Abdel-Sabour

1930-1981

Of Dust and Fire:*
A Princess Waiting

It never ceases to amaze me how one's perception of literary works changes over the years, how their meaning and value shift and change as they engage with different historical moments. Eleven years ago, I published a critical appraisal of Salah Abdel Sabour's five verse dramas (his whole dramatic output) by way of an introduction to my English translation of his last play *Now the King is Dead* (*Ba'd An Yamout Al-Malek*)**. At the time, I could find no fault with his short play *A Princess Waiting* (*Al-Amira Tantazir*); despite its excessive lyricism I had nothing but praise for it and for what I called then its "perfect fusion of folk tale, ritual and symbol." (The gushing enthusiasm of that essay makes me wince now.) I had not seen the text in performance to be able to properly judge whether it works on stage. (It was written in 1969 and first performed in 1971 when I was out of the country.) Still, it never occurred to me when I was writing about it back in 1985 that any fresh re-readings of it or any number of productions could alter my views.

But then, last week, a new production of *A Princess Waiting* (1969) opened at El-Tali'a theatre. (With another verse drama, *El-Sit Huda* by Ahmed Shawqi [1868-1932], concurrently playing next door at the National, one begins to suspect a plot to bring the Egyptian stage back to the path of respectability.) I had looked forward to the evening; it would be my first view of the *Princess* on stage. An added attraction

* 6 June 1996.

** Published by the General Egyptian Book Organisation (GEBO), Cairo, 1985.

was Mu'taza Abdel-Sabour, the late poet's daughter whom director Nasser Abdel- Mon'im had chosen for the title role. The fifty-minute performance, however, left me deeply muddled and disturbingly cold. All my smug critical complacency was shattered: the play simply did not work on stage and however vexing, one had to admit the fact. Was it perhaps the fault of this particular production? Of this director? I wondered as I cast about for a reassuring explanation or, rather, for a handy scapegoat. The production had its obvious faults of course: it was too rigidly schematic in conception, far too symmetrical in design, and all too woodenly elegant in execution.

The set, representing a bare, humble cottage in the middle of a dark, lonely wood, constantly battered by the wind, looked anything but bleak and desolate. Its three levels (suggested by the author in the printed stage directions) gave it a stately appearance, and the use of bamboo and wood in the sparse furnishings (a bed, a long, low table, a few chests and four rocking chairs) made it look snug and cosy. It was more of a charming rustic retreat rather than a dingy hide-out. Two of the princess's three maids were obviously too young to have spent "fifteen autumns" in exile, as they tell us, and all three were smartly dressed in whitish, fluttering gowns. With the princess in evening dress, the foursome looked like a bunch of girls at a party engaged in a game of charades rather than broken women in mourning, ritualistically reenacting the guilty secret of the princess. It is only when they wear the masks of the old, murdered king, the deceitful, perfidious lover and head of the palace's guards that a measure of real excitement creeps into the performance. I find masks in theatre invariably thrilling and provocative and, in this case, the contrast between the male mask and

the female body created a sense of sexual ambiguity and gave the princess's erotic supplications a sharp, ironic twist.

When the faithless lover she has long waited for finally appears, however, and tries to seduce her once more to get her to go back to the palace and confer legitimacy on his reign, the young Mu'taza, as the princess, fails to cope with the dramatic complexity of the moment. A much maturer actress in terms of years and experience was needed to communicate the warring passions in this scene, the burning sensuality and sexual ardour as well as the bitter shame, self-loathing, guilt and remorse. Amgad Abid, though equally young, had a much simpler job to do. He played the part of the princess's lover who murders her father, usurps his throne with her connivance, then ditches her – in other words, a scoundrel; no problems there. He delivered his lines with panache, a bit of a swagger and the necessary measure of oily smoothness. The saviour, too, is a straightforward enough part and gave Khalid El-Isawi no trouble (though the director gave him an atrocious constume of garish orange and brown boots). He materialises out of the blue at the princess's door as a wandering poet (saviours are always poets in Abdel-Sabour's plays), sits quietly in a corner watching the nightly rituals and the arrival of the lover, promptly gets up to stab the lover when the princess shows signs of weakening, then walks off after haranguing her on her duties as ruler.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, I could not with a clear conscience lay all my sense of disappointment and frustrated expectations at the director's door. There was something definitely wrong with the text which no amount of good acting could completely conceal. I went back and reread the play and had to admit, however

unwillingly, that underneath all the technical fripperies and the thick layers of erotic imagery, and despite the haunting atmosphere and rituals, the play was essentially a naive political parable, a cleverly disguised straightforward political message. This explains why the princess seems split down the middle, half woman, half symbol, with the two parts repelling each other and refusing to cohere. It would have helped, perhaps, if Abdel Sabour had made the princess kill her lover, as she had every reason to do, instead of waiting for the poet (an embarrassingly obvious symbol of the consciousness of the nation) to do her own dirty work and deliver the moral lesson. Back in 1969 when the play was written – within less than two years of the shattering June defeat – or in 1971, when it was first performed after Nasser's death and Sadat's accession to power, the optimistic end and the poet's cautionary harangue must have struck the audience as having immediacy and urgent political relevance. Indeed, to further underline the political message, as if it was not already sufficiently clear, Salah Abdel Sabour, at the request of director Nabil El-Alfi, added a few more lines which celebrate the end of the reign of darkness and terror and the arrival of a new dawn. Sadly, the audience of 1996 know better; they have the benefit of hindsight.

Poet, Rebel, and Martyr:*

The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj

Twenty one years after his premature death at the age of 50, Salah Abdel-Sabour still remains one of Egypt's most original and influential modern poets, not only because he has created a fresh poetic idiom and moulded a new sensibility which few poets in subsequent generations have been able to escape, but also on account of his vital innovative contribution to modern Arabic verse drama. Like T.S. Eliot, one of the major influences on his poetry, and unlike his predecessors (Ahmed Shawqi, Aziz Abazah and Ali Ahmed Bakatheer), Abdel-Sabour believed that "the essential is not ... that drama should be written in verse. The essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life which is at the same time a point of view, a world" — to quote Eliot's essay "The possibility of Poetic Drama" (1920). This is why, from the start, he placed the question of dramatic form and language at the centre, as a conscious search, a choice to be made from many "possibilities", eastern and western – including Eliot's dramatic experiments, Brecht's epic theatre, absurdist drama, the modes of oriental myth and folklore as well as the medieval passion play and its Islamic counterpart, the Iranian ritual drama of lamentation known as 'Ta'ziya'.

Abdel-Sabour's daring experimentation with form and language would have been unthinkable without the New Verse Movement which started in the late 1940s and gathered force in the 1950s. Abdel-Sabour was part of that movement and his first collection of poetry, *The People*

* 18 April 2002.

in my Country (1957), "marked a break with the rigid verse forms of classical Arabic poetry," as Samir Sarhan notes in his introduction to the English translation of Abdel-Sabour's *Night Traveller* (GEBO, 1980). The new verse form which Abdel-Sabour championed and helped, with a few other Arab pioneers, to hew and refine was ideally suited to dramatic expression. It allowed for changes in the number of feet in each line, for a change of metre from one line to another and, more importantly, it freed itself from the shackles of rhyme which in earlier verse drama had given human speech an artificial proverbial neatness, similar to the effect of the English heroic couplet, and impeded the flow of meaning from one line to another, disrupting the inner rhythm of the dramatic mood.

With a freer and more pliable verse form to work within, Abdel-Sabour concentrated all his efforts on introducing into the Arabic poem the concept of organic unity. The typical classical poem, in most cases, depended for its sense of unity on primarily external qualities – i.e., unity of rhyme and metre; the more subtle issue of imaginative cohesion, which the modern reader has since come to expect and demand, was by and large subject to chance. So long as the poet adhered to the rules of the rigid external form, he could be as rambling, abrupt or formless as he liked without being taken to task. Abdel-Sabour rejected this arbitrary mechanical form which conceived of poetic utterance as a rhetorical exercise, a form of eloquent public speaking – forceful and effective, perhaps, but very far removed from the intensity, the taut interrelatedness and internal coherence of the poetic experience as he understood it after he had come under the influence of Shakespeare, Eliot, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Lorca and Brecht, among others.

Abdel-Sabour was easily the most well-read and best informed contemporary Egyptian poet. He read deeply into literature, history, philosophy and religion, both eastern and western; and though he assimilated a great deal of western thought and philosophy, he never lost sight of his old Arabic heritage or sought to dissociate himself from it. In his bold and exciting book, *A New Reading of Ancient Arabic Poetry*, he looks at this heritage critically and sifts through it to identify kindred voices and elements that could relate to modern Arab experience. The book focuses Abdel-Saboour's conscious effort throughout his creative career to establish a dialogue – both on the levels of historical and artistic experience – between the past and the present, his inherited eastern sensibility and acquired western one; and it is this dialectical engagement that gives his best poetry its problematic, paradoxical, modern-historical implications and striking dramatic quality.

Indeed, it was inevitable that Abdel-Sabour's dramatic poetry should eventually lead him to poetic drama. His mind was essentially dramatic; it viewed existence and human experience in terms of a series of endless, related antitheses: past and present; word and deed; thought and action; myth and history; body and soul; idealism and materialism; sexual passion and religious ardour; the temporal/relative and the eternal/absolute; tragedy and comedy; Plato and Marx; Aristotle and Brecht; Nietzsche and the Moslem mystics. In his essay, "The Lover of Wisdom and the Sage of Love," Izz El-Din Isma'il has argued that Abdel-Sabour's poetry merges in one paradoxical synthesis the experiences of Faust and Don Juan to create a prototype of modern man. He is absolutely right; however, it is but one among many syntheses attempted in the plays.

Abdel-Sabour produced five plays (all available in English: *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, 1964 (rechristened *Murder in Baghdad* in the English version); *Night Traveller* and *A Princess Waiting*, two one-act plays, 1969; *Laila and the Madman*, 1970; and finally, *Now The King is Dead*, 1971. Read together, in chronological order, they represent an intense imaginative quest in the realm of art for philosophical repose and harmony. They vividly trace the difficult road the poet travelled towards the final synthesis he tentatively reached and precariously held in his last play. In terms of themes and dramaturgy, as Maher Shafiq Farid has argued in an article called "Salah Abdel-Sabour's Theatre: Meaning and Structure," they draw on a variety of dramatic sources and traditions which give them a universal relevance. And, indeed, if one remembers how Shakespeare's Hamlet and Eliot's saintly archbishop, Thomas Becket, fitfully hover around Abdel-Sabour's Al-Hallaj, how *A Princess Waiting* subtly evokes the dramatic world of Maeterlinck and the symbolists, and *Night Traveller* the plays of Ionesco, particularly *Tuer sans Gages*, and how *Now The King Is Dead* brings to mind at once Shakespeare and Brecht, Ionesco's *Exit The King*, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Pirandello's theatre- within-the-theatre, one can hardly deny the justice of Farid's remark.

Paradoxically, however, in spite of this palpable western influence, Abdel-Sabour's theatre has an unmistakable national flavour and is deeply steeped in Arabic history, myth and folklore. Moreover, it is, in one respect, an eminently political, topical theatre, i.e., the authentic product of a particular historical moment in the life of a nation, projecting its conflicts, dilemmas and urgent concerns. In fact, the key to Abdel-Sabour's dramatic durability and unfailing appeal lies in his

ability to personalize public issues and political conflicts and politicize private concerns and personal dilemans. In the plays, topical and historical events, as well as existential conflicts and spiritual turning points are built, through the use of myth, folklore and fantasy, into universal themes of enduring human interest.

The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj is a prime example of this process. It revolves round the revolt and martyrdom of the mystic-rebel Al-Hussein Bin Al-Mansour in Baghdad, in the year 309 H. (c. 930 AD). Al-Hallaj (as he was nicknamed on account of his trade as a cotton-ginner before he became a *Sufi*) was at once a mystic, a poet and a political agitator; and when he was tried and executed, it was not certain whether his charge was heresy or political agitation. Understandably, in view of his socialist leanings, his urgent sense of poetic vocation, and his deeply-ingrained mystical bent, Abdel-Sabour found in this real historical figure an apt vehicle to project his own dilemma as an intellectual torn between the overpowering urge to dedicate himself totally to the nurturing of his talent and the demands of his social conscience that push him in the direction of active political involvement. As he worked on his character, the conflict crystallized as one between thought and action, and, at this point, the dilemma of the historical Al-Hallaj, the poetical persona of Abdel-Sabour, unconsciously merged in the crucible of the poet's imagination with Hamlet's dilemma. "The time is out of joint: O, cursed spite, / that ever I was born to set it right," became Abdel-Sabour's and his hero's urgent, agonized cry, as much as Hamlet's. In other words, Shakespeare's hero, with all his rich and ambiguous associations, became the catalyst which transmuted the particular historical Arab

figure and the poet's personal dilemma into a universal theme. Inevitably, the thematic transmutation affected the dramatic design.

Abdel-Sabour originally thought of his play along the lines of Aristotelian tragedy. The final product, however, offers a different formula. In his stimulating article, "Tragedy and Symbolism in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* and *Laila and the Madman*," Sami Khashaba convincingly argues that in the former, Abdel-Sabour developed a concept of tragedy distinctly different from both the original Aristotelian one and its later reformulation by Hegel and Nietzsche, on the one hand, and, on the other, from Ferdinand Brunetiere's modern concept, based on the ideas of the enlightenment about man's freedom and his ability to decide his own destiny. The opposition of the individual's will to the will of the gods, and the inevitable eventual defeat of the hero and triumph of the gods, which underlies the classical concept of tragedy, was rejected by Abdel-Sabour, and so was the metaphysical void in which Brunetiere's theory of tragedy placed the individual's free will. Instead, he groped for a concept of the tragic that did not clash with the philosophical vision of the relation of man to God, and individual to divine will, inherent in Oriental Christianity and Islam. He tentatively propsoed a concept according to which man, in seeking to determine his fate freely, is ultimately realizing the will of God. One cannot help noting here the basically romantic and optimistic nature of such a proposition (and, indeed, Islam has often been described as an essentially romantic and optimistic faith, a faith, too, that regards social action as a form of worship and a means of spiritual fulfilment).

Abdel-Sabour's new kind of tragedy championed the individual without severing his bonds with Divine authority. Whereas in classical

tragedy the individual stood in opposition to the divine powers and their temporal reflection in the moral, social, and political systems that governed people's lives, in Abdel-Sabour's type of tragedy — a tragedy of martyrdom — the individual is aligned to God against a corrupt temporal order which obstructs the fulfilment of the Divine will. The Aristotelian hero's typical *Hamartia*, or tragic flaw, is transformed in this new tragic mode into an individually chosen and freely embraced oppositional stand against what on the surface appears as the will of God, but is later revealed to be in harmony with it and only against the will of a misguided or evil temporal authority. And though the temporal authority finally succeeds in destroying the hero, the tragic end (death, which significantly takes the form of crucifixion here) becomes, paradoxically, a victorious fulfilment of the hero's individual human will as well as a confirmation of the will of God. In contrast, the triumph of the temporal authority in destroying the rebel hero is defined as a crime in the eyes of God and a breach of faith. In this way, the secular and religious planes merge, and the tragic hero becomes Christ-like, at once a political revolutionary and an emissary of fate, a saviour and sacritifical figure. And since Al-Hallaj is in one aspect a poet, as most of Abdel-Sabour's later heroes (or personas) are, one suspects that Abdel-Sabour was drawing here on the old image of the poet as prophet who speaks through divine inspiration, as well as on the tradition of the passion play.

Given Abdel-Sabour's literary prestige at the time and his wide popularity, one would have expected *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* to be snapped up by the National as soon as it appeared in print. But it was the heyday of realistic prose drama and the play had to wait for two years before director Samir El-Asfouri decided to stage it at El-Masrah

El-Hadith (Modern Theatre) where it opened in the 1966/67 season. Judging by a video recording of the production, he tried to strike a balance between the themes of martyrdom and political rebellion the hero combines, casting the former in a classical mode and the latter in a Brechtian one. The influence of Brecht's epic theatre is detectable in the text in the patches of scabrous humour and vulgar language which are meant to contrast with the delicate feelings, noble sentiments and heightened poetry of the *Sufis*, as well as in Abdel-Sabour's manipulation of the chorus of the poor, sick and weary whom the hero invites to "come unto" him in the street scenes. The text, however, does not suggest a classical mode of delivery for Al-Hallaj, but a passionate romantic one, alternating with spells of doubtful anxiety and moments of deep resignation or utter despair. Unfortunately, El-Asfouri entrusted the part to veteran classical actor Mohamed El-Sab' who looked more like a well-fed local preacher than an ascetic mystic and seemed to care more for the sonorous enunciation of the verse rather than the character's moods and feelings. The Hamletian dimension Abdel-Sabour took pains to build into the character was stridently waved aside in favour of a sedately patriarchal construction of the part. With his burly, sturdy figure, deep, broad voice, ponderously rhythmical delivery and uniformly unruffled composure, one wonders if El-Sab' was able to stir in the audience who watched him in the flesh any degree of pathos.

With a religious hero, an all-male cast (indeed, an all-male dramatic world) and not a shadow of romantic interest lurking even in the wings, *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* can never be expected to make a popular hit. But, in the right setting (which a traditional picture-frame stage is certainly not), and with sensitive casting, the play can prove an

overwhelming theatrical and emotional experience. This is how I remember it from Ahmed Abdel Aziz's 1984 production. For his performance space, he chose the intimate Salah Abdel-Sabour small hall at El-Tali'a theatre which could only accommodate a small audience, in close proximity with the actors. The acting area, at the same level with the audience, was bare except for a couple of rugged blocks for seats, a few tiered ramps at the back for the judges to sit on in the trial scene, and a number of ropes which were effectively used at the end to tie up the hero and form a huge cross, spread over the whole space, around him. The different locations in the play – a *Sufi*'s cell, a prison, a street and a court-room – were exclusively marked by the change of lighting and the shape, feel and atmosphere of each were imaginatively evoked by the subtle deployment of light and shadow. Ahmed Abdel-Aziz himself (much younger then and a lot slimmer, with finely-chiselled features and arresting huge black eyes) played the title-role with a mixture of burning ardour, desperate urgency, disarming innocence and deep pathos. I still remember how his eyes could look sometimes like clear pools of light, at others, like abyssal dark holes and how his thin, wiry body seemed to glow in the shadow, sending off waves of electrifying energy. It was a rare performance in an unforgettable show.

The current production, also at El-Tali'a, but this time at the larger Zaki Tolaimat hall, is a revival of the 1984 one. It uses the same concentrated version of the play Abdel-Aziz prepared back then, but with a new simple, but less frugal, geometrical set (designed by Mustafa El-Sharqawi). The idea of the circle (suggesting at once a vicious circle and the circular whirling in *Sufi* dancing and generally powerful in esoteric cults), which in the earlier performance was created purely by light, is more solidly rendered here in the semi-circular shape

of both the stage (where two crescent-shaped ramps slope down from the backstage sides to meet at the front) and the tiered structure in the background which rises to form a stepped pyramid – the solid pyramid of temporal authority which crushes Al-Hallaj at the end. As a symbol, it was too garishly obvious and had the added vice of eating up most of the small performance space. The lighting was as sensitive and evocative as it was in the previous production, but it needed a larger or less cluttered space to achieve its full effect. The ropes were replaced with metal chains and used for the same effect; but, again, they needed more space for the cross they create at the end to have its full impact. The final scene in the current production shows Al-Hallaj hanging limply from a rope round his neck while Ali El-Haggar's stirring voice and Amir Abdel-Megid's mellow tunes fill the small auditorium with mournful song. It was an emotional moment which brought tears to the eyes of many, including myself; but even as I cried, I found myself regretting the changes Abdel-Aziz introduced and missing the ascetic simplicity, white-flame purity and dignified austerity of the previous production.

In one respect, however, the acting, the current *Al-Hallaj* matched the earlier one. Ahmed Abdel-Aziz wisely decided not to take on the part this time. He chose for it Mahmoud Mas'ood whose sensitive face, clear, candid eyes and rapt expression always make him look saint-like, even off stage. As Al-Hallaj he was as convincing as he was in the part of John the Baptist in Mohamed Salmawi's *Salome*. He was of course much older than the earlier Al-Hallaj; nevertheless, he managed to suggest a disarmingly affectionate, forgiving temperament and a childlike trusting nature which no amount of suffering could embitter.

Rather than passion, he displayed a kind of intense eagerness that is only encountered in children. One could not help loving him and this made his quiet, baffled resignation in the trial scene and his bewildered surprise and anguished incomprehension as he was hanged intensely moving and painful.

Abdel-Sabour died on 18 August 1981. His last two collections of poetry, *Night Trees* and *Voyaging through Memory*, are imbued with a palpable valedictory tone, as if he was predicting his imminent departure, or, may be, courting it. In one poem he says, "this year's winter tells me I am dying alone".

I met him for the last time at a small gathering of friends at the former Heliopolis home of Samir Sarhan (the playwright who succeeded him as head of GEBO – the state publishing house) a couple of months before his death. He was his usual warm and charming self, but somewhat pensive. When the conversation got round to new poets, he ruefully admitted that he was finding it increasingly difficult to write poetry and regretted that for the past ten years he had not been able to produce another poetic drama. "May be I have finally dried up," he said and fell silent. For Abdel-Sabour, living was synonymous with writing poetry and it was perhaps inevitable that he should die once he began to sense (rightly or wrongly) the waning of his poetic energy. He was one of those people who could never live off past glories or rest cheerfully on their laurels.

Mahmoud Diab

1932-1983

Conquerors and Traitors:*

Bab El-Futuh

Like Traitors' Gate in the Tower of London, Conquerors' Gate is a real gate in old Cairo, known in Arabic as Bab El-Futuh. Mahmoud Diab's *Bab El-Futuh*, however, is a symbolic one and has nothing to do with Cairo. The play is set for the most part in Palestine during the Crusades. After the opening scene, which is more in the nature of a prologue and set in the present, in some unspecified Arab country, a group of students who have been discussing the roots of the current Arab political malaise decide to re-enact history. Having established the basic dialectical formula of a play-within-a-play, the action moves back in time to the reign of Salaheddin El-Ayyubi and his famous conquests in Palestine.

In the following scene, Salaheddin has just beaten the Crusaders at the gates of Jerusalem and entered the city, when a traveller arrives from distant Andalusia (then under Arab rule) to deliver a book into the hands of the conqueror. He spends the rest of the play trying to see him but to no avail; his efforts are constantly aborted by the sultan's men, his soldiers, his official and pedantic historian, his chief of guards and the rich merchants of the city who are in league with them. Throughout the play, the sultan, who engages most of the dialogue and seems to haunt the place and control everybody's life, remains in the wings like some hidden god securely out of reach and out of touch.

---

* 22 August 1991.

As the traveller's frustration mounts, a pointed sense of urgency builds up around his task and the book he carries grows in importance, finally becoming something of a holy gospel. The book, however, which is entitled Bab El-Futuh, has nothing to do with religion; it propounds, as we discover from the excerpts read out on stage, a political doctrine based on social justice, democracy and human rights. This doctrine, Diab asserts through his mythical traveller, is the only gate to victory and without it all Salaheddin's conquests will avail him nothing. This is the lesson the chorus of students learn from their voyage into history.

It was also, of course, a veiled message to Nasser after the 1967 defeat and a bitterly ironical admonition. Like Salaheddin who had founded the most powerful Muslim state in the world at the time and who had won Jerusalem but failed to secure it, Nasser, in Diab's view, had also failed to bolster his military takeover with political legitimacy and the rule of law. The military became absolute rulers, crushing all dissent and running the country as if it was a semi-feudal family federation of the Ayyubid brand. The result, the play argues, was the 1967 defeat and the loss of Sinai among other Arab territories.

By the end of the play, the glorious conquerors have all been exposed as tyrants and traitors. No wonder that the play, which was written in the aftermath of the 1967 disaster, was banned, together with a host of others running on the same theme. It received its first public performance at the hands of director Sa'd Ardash in the seventies, in the first flush of the 1973 victory and Sadat's short honeymoon with the intellectuals.

Once more, Sa'd Ardash was behind *Bab El-Futuh* in the present, much-curtailed production, and he conducted it in the same austere Brechtian style as the previous one. The cast did a fair job, performing adequately, if not brilliantly. Talent was in evidence, but also a lack of training and craftsmanship. This is perhaps what prompted the energetic, ever-enthusiastic Ardash to suggest to the Tanta University authorities that they set up a permanent theatre workshop which he volunteered to run. Let us hope it materialises.

The production obviously won first prize in the Universities Annual Contest on the strength of the chosen script and the direction. Diab, who sadly died in his forties nearly a decade ago, was a brilliant and daring writer, though not as fertile as some of his contemporaries. His short, dramatic career, which started in 1964 with *The Old House* (a bourgeois drama about social climbing), produced less than ten plays, most of them in one act. His merit, however, is not reflected in the number of his plays and rests mainly on his 'peasant' dramas. His first was *The Storm*, in 1966, which brought him instant fame and recognition and was widely performed on improvised stages in the provinces. Encouraged by the success, and feeling "charged with the responsibility of presenting the theatre with the picture of the peasant as a human being," as he once declared in an interview, he went on to write another peasant drama, *Harvest Nights* (1967), in which he tried his hand at the play-within-a-play technique. He received further acclaim and it is possible that Diab intended to further plough the genre he had developed and introduce into it other daring technical innovations; but the 1967 defeat deflected his dramatic course. Describing its impact on him, he said: "The setback (*naksa*) was a fearful blow which made me lose all sense of reason. I was quite unable

to write anything. The feelings I had were simply too forceful to put down or reflect in a work of art. However I am sure that I will start writing again – and about these particular events – when their impact begins to lessen." And he did. The pain and shock were transmuted into art in *Bab El-Futuh*, a daring epic work of grand proportions. It was at once his most ambitious and last full-length work.

If the Tanta University production had done nothing but remind us of the achievements of this much neglected and scarcely performed writer, it would still have been quite well worth it. As it is, it did more, acquitting itself creditably and with honour.

A Play for Today:*

A Land Where Flowers Do Not Grow

In Mahmoud Diab's *A Land Where Flowers Do Not Grow*, written in 1979 in response to the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord, Amr Ibn Adei, the young king of Al-Hira, proposes marriage to his hereditary foe, Al-Zabaa or Zanubia, the legendary queen of Tadmur, to end the long and bloody feud between their two countries. "How do you think our two peoples are going to feel about this marriage?" she asks. "They are going to hate it," he candidly replies; "but we will have to teach them to like it." Echoing Diab's pessimism about the prospects of peace, at least for his generation, Al-Zabaa says: "Listen to me my friend. In a land which has drunk up so much blood, love can never take root or flower."

Listening to this dialogue at Al-Hanager soon after watching president Mubarak and king Hussein at Rabin's funeral on television had the impact of an electric shock. It felt as if, once more, the Egyptian theatre was engaging history in debate, as it had often done in the sixties. The coincidence of Rabin's assassination with the revival of this play in two different productions, running concurrently at Al-Hanager and Naguib El-Rihani cultural centres, strikes one as positively uncanny. In choosing to revive this particular text now, by no means one of Diab's best or most technically daring, directors Hasan Al-Wazir and Hanaa Abdel-Fattah were no doubt responding as artists to the difficult and complex emotional challenge posed by the Israeli-

* 16 November 1995.

Palestinian peace process. They could not, however, have foreseen that history would actively interfere to give the play in both productions burning relevance and a cutting edge.

A Land Where Flowers Do Not Grow was Diab's last play, bringing to a close a brilliant dramatic career which started in 1962 when he was thirty. By 1979, this fervent and idealistic revolutionary was feeling thoroughly betrayed. The 1967 defeat had marked for him the collapse of the national dream and the national project and he never quite got over it. Artistically, it effected a change of direction: his exuberant experiments with social realism in order to create a rural, communal theatre and authentic dramas of peasant life – experiments which constitute his major and most original contribution to Egyptian drama – became fewer and far between, giving way to a more direct form of political theatre which frequently (predictably enough) ran foul of the censor. After a period of stunned silence, and two indifferent one-act plays – *The Guests* (about the irreperable loss of communication between the educated middle classes and the peasantry) and *The Piano* (about an artist defeated by society) — Diab got down to the business of trying to understand and come to terms with the traumatic June defeat. *Bab El-Futuh* (*Conquerors' Gate*) was the result – an epic drama in the Brechtian vein where the reign of Nasser and his defeat are played off against the reign of the medieval Arab conqueror Salaheddin El-Ayyubi. Written in 1970, it did not receive a public airing until 1976 when Sa'd Ardash directed it for the National. After Brecht, Diab turned to the mode of absurd drama, in vogue in the early sixties – perhaps the better to elude the watchful eye of the censor. In three

successive short pieces, all bitterly ironical, he vented his by now almost nihilistic political rage at both the regime and its apathetic subjects. The censor, however, "absurd or no absurd", was not to be hoodwinked, and the trilogy, published under the title *A Good Man in Three Stories*, was denied permission for public performance. But since the censor's sway did not extend to either Baghdad or Damascus, the trilogy was performed in both capitals in 1972.

After the October war of 1973, Sadat's peace initiative, combined with his economic 'open-door' policy, dealt a final blow – something of a knockout – to Diab's most cherished dreams and deep-seated convictions. The ideal world he had passionately believed in and had hoped to live to see had proved a mirage. Though reeling, he responded with three plays: *Cave-dwellers '74* (a symbolic fantasy about a group of wax statues who come to life to claim their former positions and privileges in society); *A Messanger from the Village of Tumirah* (a political parable about the peasants who go to the war and die *gratis*, and are even robbed after their death); and *The Barrel Organ*, a serious musical drama and Diab's last plea for a classless society.

For the next four years Diab steered clear of stage drama, adapting one of his novels and Dostoevesky's *The Brothers Karamazov* for the cinema and writing a drama serial for the Syrian television based on the legend spun by the Arabs around queen Zanubia who ruled the ancient kingdom of Tadmur (in present day Syria) in the 3rd century A.D. In 1979, however, Diab suddenly published (in the *Theatre Magazine*) what was to become his last play: *A Land Where Flowers Don't* (or *Won't) Grow*. It was not strange that the character of queen Zanubia, developed in the T.V. serial, should continue to haunt and inspire him

here; nor was it surprising that he should find in the deadly feud between two old neighbour states a parallel to the Arab-Israeli conflict. What was unexpected was the choice of form. For this, his last play, Diab chose to revert to an old western dramatic form and produced a straightforward classical tragedy and a heroine worthy of Racine. It is as if he wanted to bring his dramatic career full circle, or to reach out at the end further back than the social realism he had started with. But whatever Diab's reasons for choosing this form, it served him well. The complex passions of the characters, their raging inner conflicts, their desperate struggle to escape their destinies and shake off the oppressive legacy of hatred and bloodshed – all this, together with Zanubia's final dignified embracing of death – gave weight and depth to Diab's reflections on the possibility of an Arab-Israeli peace and invested them with true tragic pathos. By the end of the play, it is no longer a political issue, but a searing, impossibly existential choice.

No wonder both directors, in the two current productions of the play, decided to cut a low directorial profile and let the text speak for itself. Good actors or, at least, one good actress is all it needs to focus the central dilemma and put it across. In this respect, both directors were fortunate: Sawsan Badr, at Al-Hanager, and Wafaa El-Hakim, at El-Rihani cultural centre, gave passionate, convincing performances, sometimes achieving real tragic grandeur. There was also the "power of the moment" which gave both productions a sense of urgent immediacy — as if the fate of peace in the Middle East really depended on the choices made by those tormented tragic figures.

Soon after writing *A Land Where Flowers Don't Grow*, Diab became the victim of sever depression and lived almost a recluse. Three

years later, at the age of fifty, he was dead. A neighbour and close friend of his remembers the last time he saw him. The once scrupulously elegant playwright and lawyer walked out of his flat in his indoor clothes and bedroom slippers, holding an empty saucepan in his hand. He looked dishevelled, unshaved and unwashed, and wore a dazed, distracted look. Questioned by the once intimate friend where he was going, he answered curtly, "to buy *fuul* and bread from a place round the corner" and rudely declined the friend's offer to run the errand for him. The friend tagged along, hoping to engage him in conversation. It was fruitless; Diab kept a sullen silence. Back at the door of Diab's flat, and before he knew what was happening, the friend found the door slammed shut in his face. Diab had bolted in. A few months later, and just as aburptly, he bolted out of life. What a pity we know so little about Diab's last years when the works of Dostoyevsky were his only and constant companions. One wonders what he thought and felt; but all we have are a few scattered recollections.

Naguib Sorour

1932-1987

Multiple Ironies:*

Yaseen and Baheya

1964 has special interest in the history of modern Egyptian drama and is still regarded by many as something of a turning point. In that year, after three relatively successful ventures into realistic drama, Yusef Idris (1927-1991) produced a curious new play which seemed, on the surface, to break new grounds and effect a complete rupture with the inherited western forms and familiar theatrical conventions. His *El-Farafeer* (*Small Fry* or *Underlings*) was intended, it seemed, as a practical illustration of the ideas he had passionately advocated a few months earlier, in 1963, in a series of articles published in *El-Katib* magazine under the title *Towards An Egyptian Theatre*. The articles represented Idris's thinking on the origins and directions of the Egyptian dramatic tradition at that juncture in his career; its core was a plea to renounce the European model and look for a more culturally authentic alternative among the various 'theatrical' social phenomena – from street brawls and religious rituals to ceremonies at funerals and weddings – which have been an innate part of Egyptian life for centuries. He ended his argument by suggesting that the *Samer* – a popular form of semi-improvised communal entertainment which features dancing, singing, clowning, juggling, story-telling and satirical sketches of daily life – provided an exemplary vehicle for evolving an indigenous theatrical medium.

Ironically, *El-Farafeer* was staged by director Karam Metaweh (1933-1996) not in a barn, a street marquee, or a village square — as

* Spring 2002.

most *Samers* are (or, rather were, as they have since become defunct) — nor even in a theatre-in-the-round, with the audience surrounding the stage, as Idris had insisted in his detailed stage-directions, but in a traditional Italian box theatre, and the National at that. Although Mutaweh planted some actors among the audience and did his best to demolish the invisible 'fourth wall' to achieve a degree of spontaneous interaction between stage and auditorium, the solid architecture of the theatre, with its pronounced European provenance, as well as the calibre of its clientele clashed sharply with the author's intentions. The bourgeois audience and critics were amused, even thrilled by the novelty of the experiment, but it would take an inordinate degree of myopia or self-deception to claim that it had anything of the look, spirit, feel or atmosphere of a real *Samer*, has laid the foundation for a true popular theatre or dramatic form, or was anything more than a brilliant aesthetic formal exercise.

The irony multiplied when in November the same year, within weeks of the opening of *El-Farafeer*, another experiment at creating an 'authentic' Egyptian drama, away from the European model, was attempted. Written by a peasant about peasants, and, seemingly, for peasants, and openly drawing on an old popular ballad by way of invoking the folk oral tradition of storytelling, Naguib Sorour's *Yaseen and Baheya* was staged at the new highbrow and elitist Pocket theatre by the same Italian-trained director. *Yaseen and Baheya* was written in Budapest, in 1963 where the author, a gifted poet of the new school of free verse, as well as a talented actor and director and a passionately committed socialist to boot, had been sent to study directing after graduating from the theatre institute. More of a narrative poem (as it was labelled when it appeared in print in 1965) than a play, it seemed to

challenge the very concept of what constitutes a dramatic text. In it, Sorour had wanted to achieve a kind of folk art akin to the tradition of the *Sira* singers in which the bard would narrate the handed-down epic in rhythmic prose, interspersed with songs, wise proverbs and lines of verse, occasionally improvising dialogue in the passages of emotional tension. Sorour knew that tradition well from his years in Akhtab village in the Daqahleya province where he was born and spent most of his childhood and teens. In those years, strolling story-tellers and Sira singers were still familiar figures and he learnt his first lessons in poetry and performance from them before he ever laid eyes on an Arabic classical poem or read Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare or Byron – the poets to whom he pays homage in the prologue of the play.

But the predominantly narrative form of *Yaseen and Baheya* was not the only aspect that triggered controversy. Sorour had used the title, the main characters and the basic conflict in the old ballad; but instead of a village in Upper Egypt at the beginning of the century, or even earlier, he set his drama in contemporary Buhout – a village in the Nile Delta where a peasant revolt against the feudal lords had erupted and been brutally quelled a few years before the 1952 revolution. The memory of that bloody incident was still fresh in the minds of people in 1964 and was often trotted out by the new regime and its supporters to justify the new land reform laws and the wholesale confiscation of property and businesses. Within such a frame, the old ballad was used as a method of intensified political expression in a contemporary setting and the emotional and linguistic centre of the work shifted away from the old romantic interest in favour of a fervent ideological statement. Here, Baheya ('the radiant', as the name means) was no longer just a village beauty and Yaseen's sweetheart who is coveted by the lecherous

'Pasha'; in the foregrounded conflict between exploited and exploiter, oppressed and oppressor, she grows into a symbol of Egypt and the story of Buhout and its struggle for freedom and social justice takes precedence over the tragic-love story which becomes both a vehicle and a symbol of that struggle.

While some critics, like Mahmoud Amin El-Alem, complained of the liberties the poet had taken with the original "old, *Sa'idi* (Upper Egyptian) popular epic," wondering why he did not choose other names for the hero and heroine as he did for the setting, others, equally prestigious and with academic credentials, like Mohamed Mandour and Amin El-Ayouti, tried to defend its form alternately in terms of the practices of the ancient Greek dramatists who had used narration, a chorus and well-known stories and legends to discuss contemporary issues, or the theory of the epic theatre propagated by the German Marxist poet Bertolt Brecht. It was a horrendous irony and one wonders how Sorour felt about it. It seemed as if the harder a dramatist tried to break free of the European dramatic tradition, the more deeply he became (in the eyes of critics at least) entrenched in it. It had happened with Idris whose *El-Farafeer*, with its master-servant central theme, was variously traced back to the old Roman comedy, the *Commedia dell'arte*, the medieval *Everyman* and Moliere and compared to Pirandello's theatre and even to Beckett's two tramps in *Waiting for Godot*; and now it was happening to Sorour and his *Yaseen and Baheya.*

But however much critics may controvert the origins of these two experiments or dispute their merits, few will deny their sincerity or far-reaching influence on subsequent generations, from Mahmoud Diab and

Shawqi Abdel-Hakim to Saleh Sa'd and Hasan El-Gretly. They both represent, each in its own way, the earliest critically conscious attempts to revitalize modern Egyptian (and, perhaps, Arab) drama by drawing on primitive sources, releasing the energies of an old, long despised, popular dramatic tradition, and attempting, particularly in Sorour's case, to evolve a language that has seemingly pre-literary qualities – a language that has the vigour and flexibility of the vernacular, its primary colours, crude and homely images, earthy rhythms and tough lyricism. In this, to add one more irony, they remind one of Yeats's hope for a popular theatre which, as an art form, could reach back towards "a time when (theatre) was nearer human life and instinct, before it had gathered about it so many mechanical specialisations and traditions."

The analogy with Yeats is particularly apt in the case of Sorour, since both were poets, with strong political allegiances and a firm sense of national roots. Like Yeats, who cites the revitalizing influence of the ballad on Wordsworth and Coleridge in his *Explorations*, Sorour believed that a new, more authentic and more dramatic kind of poetry could be achieved by reaching back to an earlier, less literary language – a living speech with a distinct pictorial and sensuous force which took its rhythms from the pulse of living people and its themes and diction from daily life. Towards this end, he set out on a perilous course in his dramatic debut, mixing prose and verse, the lyrical and the coarse, classical and colloquial Arabic, and narration with dialogue, song, comment, and direct address to the audience.

The critical response was equally mixed and often puzzled. The language of *Yaseen and Baheya* was unprecedented; no one had heard the like of it on stage before (and rarely off it); and the novelty was

giddying and not infrequently exasperating. To describe its impact, or, at least, what it was trying to achieve, one has, again, to return to Yeats. "Before men read," he says, "they loved language, and all literature was then, whether in the mouth of minstrels, players or singers, but the perfection of an art that everybody practiced, a flower out of the stem of life. And language," he goes on to add, "continually renewed itself in that perfection, returning to daily life."

Yaseen and Baheya ends with the villagers' uprising and Yaseen's death; but Baheya lives on and continues to haunt Sorour for years afterwards – perhaps to the end of his life. His next two plays – *Ah Ya Leil Ya Amar (O, Night! O, Moon!)*, staged by Galal El-Sharqawi at El-Hakim theatre in 1967, and *Oulu li Ein el-Shams (Tell the Eye of the Sun)*, directed for the National by Tawfiq Abdel-Latif in 1973 (both of which take their titles from popular folk songs and feature an active chorus; though not a narrator) – trace Baheya's progress from Buhout to Port Said and Suez, from youth to old age, and from hope to bitter disillutionment. Her journey, which ends with the 1967 defeat, records, in the form of a theatrical parable, Sorour's reading of contemporary Egyptian historys and the whole trilogy represents an accurate and painful document of the poet's growing disenchantment with the new regime and his final frantic despair as he foresaw what the future held.

Of the three plays in this trilogy, *Yaseen and Baheya* is the least frequently performed – understandably, perhaps, in view of its unusual form and the demands it makes on the performer who takes on the role of the narrator. It was, therefore, something of a surprise to hear that young Syrian director Rolla Fattal had decided to stage it at Al-Hanager. The irony of the choice of venue was not lost upon me; Al-Hanager is

currently performing the same function as the Pocket theatre of the 1960s. Like Mutaweh, I thought, Rolla had seen this text (which its author, himself a director, had thought of as quite simple, needing no gimmicks) as primarily a challenge for a young, daring, experimental director. Quite predictably, therefore, and as was the case in the first production, though more drastically this time, the text was severely cut – a task she wisely entrusted to Yusri Khamis who managed to keep in most of the significant lines and pivotal themes and images. Her choice of narrator, however, was not equally fortunate. Magda El-Khateeb, though an excellent actress in realistic parts, is quite out of her depth when faced with classical Arabic or any kind of verse. She simply has not got the ear for it or the necessary training. She shouted the lines at the audience in a monotone at a disconcertingly erratic tempo, stumbling over the words sometimes and occasionally coming up with the most original declensions. El-Khateeb is at her best with highly-strung, slightly neurotic characters, in tense, dialogic situations, with few words and plenty of eloquent silences. Here, she simply was given too much to say, and ruthlessly left to say it alone, and she sank under the load of words.

Unlike the original production in which the characters in the story were enacted by the chorus of listeners surrounding the storyteller in a circle, so that they constantly moved in and out of the parts, bridging the past and the present, this one rarely allowed the characters and narrator to share the same space and seemed to make a point of visually separating them. Most of the time, Magda El-Khateeb looked pathetically lost and isolated in the huge empty space facing us, while the rest of the characters were walled (or, rather, holed) up in an elaborate, three-storey structure at her back, made up of little cells,

seemingly supported by the trunks of palm trees and lined and padded with straw mats. In those rooms/tombs, they uttered their lines standing, sitting or reclining, and if they moved at all, it was either horizontally from one box to another or up and down the different levels; but, except for Yaseen and Baheya, they were never allowed to step outside that forbidding structure which in one scene housed the tombs and corpses of the dead as well. The ideas of death and incarceration were of course intended and diligently applied. Indeed, the visual composition of the stage, impressively designed by Mahmoud Mabrouk, was meant as a concrete metaphor of what Rolla wanted to tell us through her production.

By breaking up the originally intended circle of the *Samer*, which signifies the communal sharing of the past in the present, and relegating the characters visually and temporally to an imposing but tomb-like past in the background which, at the same time, has the look of a modern block of flats, Rolla seemed to be ironically saying that not only the past, but also the present have become museums and mausoleums, that our cities, with all their blazing lights, are not very different from Buhout where, in the words of Sorour, the darkness of the grave shrouded everything unless the moon came to the rescue. Watching from the back of the auditorium the second time, the stage looked to me like one big, black box stacked up with a lot of small boxes, and the actors appeared like moles bumping about in dark, little burrows. But listening to the opening lines of Sorour's prologue, delivered (atrociously, one might add) in a voiceover at the beginning and end of the show, accompanied by Basem El-Attar's stirring music, while far at the back of the stage one of the little rooms on the ground level showed a silhouette of a desk with a typewriter on top and an empty chair, I felt

a sharp stab of pathos. Rolla had wanted to say something about our times through this production for sure, and she did; but at that moment, I also realised that she had meant it as both an elegy and a tribute to a fellow artist who was also an unusual human being – a man who loved his people – not wisely, perhaps, but too well.

A Modern Isis Stalks the Boards:*

Mineen Ageeb Nas

Mineen Ageeb Nas li Ma'nat El-Kalam Yequluh (Where Can I Find People Who Can Spell Out the Meaning of Words), currently at Al-Hanager, is the last play of Naguib Sorour's quartet of peasant verse dramas. Like the first three – *Yaseen and Baheya* (staged at the Pocket Theatre by Karam Metaweh in 1964 then last year at Al-Hanager), *Ah Ya Leil Ya Amar* (O, Night!, O, Moon!, directed by Galal El-Sharqawi at El-Hakim theatre in 1967) and *Oulu li 'Ein el-Shams* (Tell the Eye of the Sun, directed for the National by Tawfiq Abdel Latif in 1973) – it is written in a mixture of verse and rhymed prose, in both colloquial and classical Arabic. Like them too, it draws on songs and narratives from the folk oral tradition and El-Samer, an old popular mode of communal entertainment, to fashion a new kind of epic, poetic drama – on the model of Brecht – through which the poet can project his reading of modern Egyptian history and air his ideological beliefs in effective theatrical terms.

Written sometime between 1973 and 1978 (when he died), its tone – though still passionate in defence of the poor and oppressed and in denunciation of their oppressors – is more conciliatory and has nothing of the bitterness and despair of the earlier plays. It is as if in this last play Sorour was replaying the earlier themes and motifs in a new key and groping for some kind of final reconciliation – for a kind of wisdom that would explain all the unnecessary terrible pain and suffering and make sense of it as part of a quest for integrity and

* March 2003.

salvation. The tragic love story of Yaseen and Baheya, immortalized in the *Mawwal* (popular ballad) that carries their names and gives the first play in the quartet its title, is replayed in a different variation through the Hassan and Na'ima ballad.

In the earlier *Yaseen and Baheya*, where the action begins at the beginning of the tale, with the tender love story and marriage plans of the hero and heroine, the chronological progress of events always creates the illusion that something may yet happen to stop the course of events and avert the tragedy. But here, the play begins when all is lost and nothing can be saved, redressed or retrieved: Hassan, the singer, has already been slaughtered by Na'ima's kinsmen and his beheaded body thrown into the Nile. This creates at the outset a mood of quiet resignation – of the kind of repose that accompanies despair – and the action takes on the character of a quest for solace through making sense of the tragedy and reading some deeper meaning in it.

Still dazed with the shock and numbed by grief, Na'ima sets out on her journey in search of Hassan's body in a state of befuddled incomprehension. She sees what happened as a cruel and senseless tragedy which concerns her alone rather than as part of a bigger design, a bigger evil. All she hopes for, in her wanderings with her lover's disembodied head, is to find his headless body, not (like her counterpart Isis) in order to put him back together again and bring him back to life, but merely to give him a decent burial, thereby getting some kind of closure (in modern terms). As she tells the good fairies who try to console her, echoing an ancient Egyptian belief, if the body is not buried whole, the spirit, in the form of a bird, cannot find its way back to it for the resurrection on the Day of Judgement. Throughout

most of the first part, even though Hassan's body is sighted once or twice, the tone remains muted and never becomes suspenseful.

The action takes the form of a quest, at once realistic and metaphoric, and proceeds like a picaresque narrative. What the search for the body yields, however, is nothing material. As Na'ima wanders through the valley, she meets different kinds of people – peasants, fishermen, shepherds, factory workers, the ghosts of soldiers killed in senseless wars and buried in the desert, an escaped convict, unjustly imprisoned and tortured and, finally, the students of the famous 1941 Abbas Bridge demonstrations who drowned in the Nile when the British troops opened the bridge while they were crossing it.

Gradually, the journey in space becomes a journey in time, through modern history, and she progressively gains awareness. In her progress, she learns to identify Hassan with all the oppressed and freedom-fighters she meets and to see her personal suffering as part of a large affliction which involves all the wretched of the earth. To lift the oppression requires defiance and human offerings, and she finally perceives that Hassan's defiance and death were not in vain. Like the soldiers whose blood mixes with the desert sand, sprouting palm trees and cotton blossoms, the students whose bodies fell into the Nile, like the human sacrifice the Ancient Egyptians used to throw annually into the river, Hassan's death becomes a kind of primitive fertility rite in which his blood mixes with the water to feed the soil. It is at this moment that Na'ima, accompanied by the three fairies who have throughout acted as her guardian angels, saving her from the demon-like Zionist gang, reaches a point of reconciliation and accepts to

inter Hassan's head in the earth, knowing that it will join his body through the living earth and the eternal Nile.

The message here, embedded in both the language and dramatic structure of the play, is that without clarity of vision and complete awareness, symbolized by the severed head which must return to the body, there can be no salvation. It is a message we come across in many plays in the 1960s and is by no means unique to Sorour. In such plays, what is known as dramatic development does not consist in the elaboration of one action but, rather, takes the form of the development of the hero's or heroine's political consciousness. In the case of Na'ima, this is marked by a realisation of her identity as an extension of Isis and Baheya, and that of Hassan as both Yaseen and Osiris. Finally, she grasps the meaning of the riddle that says "death is sometimes the only road to life."

The current production, directed by Murad Munir at Al-Hanager, is, for the most part, a revival of his own staging of the same play for the Modern Theatre compeny in 1985. From the previous performance he kept more or less the same sets, costumes, blocking, the mixing of historical fact with theatrical poetic metaphor, especially in the battle and demonstration scenes, the grotesque, larger-than-life masks, the musical framework and even the same singer. Except for the change of heroine and most of the cast and a few minor alterations here and there, introduced to give the old performance a face-lift and topical relevance, one could easily imagine oneself back in 1985. The same set-designer of the previous production, Ibrahim El-Moteli, kept the childish-looking painted partition representing the Nile flowing from Upper Egypt down the valley. Thank heavens, however, this time Murad Munir took the

wise decision of removing the Styrofoam head smeared with blood which the previous Na'ima carried around all the time and the grotesque spectacle of Hassan's headless body fitfully materializing to slide down the partition like a decapitated Frankenstein; both were a source of much mockery and laughter in the 1985 production. An improvement was flanking the stage on both sides with what looked like parts of the exterior walls of houses and temples carved out of rock. To approximate the appearance of the popular *Samer*, he added steps covered with straw mats leading down to the auditorium, with a seating platform on one side for the live Oriental band (*takht*).

The acting style on the whole was intended to involve the audience in the Sixties agit-prop tradition. Unfortunately, however, more often than not this tends to manifest itself as haranguing: Ahmed Maher, whether as the escaped prisoner or revolutionary leader, consistently barked his lines at us. One cannot understand why actors invariably choose to demonstrate their patriotic spirit by hectoring the hapless audience. It was a positive relief to hear Wafaa Sadiq speak; she adopted a naturalistic tone and stuck to it throughout; this made her grief and moments of distress at once convincing and moving. Her frail appearance, gentle beauty, raven hair and black dress made her every inch the damsel in distress. In one respect, this was a pity since it made her performance one-dimensional, always pathetic and pitiful. One missed the more vigorous performance of the older, more seasoned Mohsina Tawfiq in the 1985 production where you could more vividly sense the shift from innocence to knowledge and from weakness to empowerment.

However, it is hardly Wafaa Sadiq's fault since simplistic thinking seems to dog this production like a relentless nemesis. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the ludicrous scene of the Evil Zionist gang, performed with oversized, grotesque masks of Sharon, Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir (by Nagla Ra'fat), a Jewish menorah, a huge Star of David and a voluptuous dancer in a skintight, off-the-shoulder black leotard, hissing and writhing around the prostrate Na'ima. It gave me a start when Ali El-Haggar walked onstage and said something to the effect that now, having paid lip-service to the Palestinian cause and watched Na'ima being saved from the clutches of the Zionist enemy by the timely intervention of the good fairies (cold comfort for the Palestinians), we were now entitled to some fun – whereupon he burst into song and a group of motley hash-smokers staggered in, accompanied by a hip-wiggling, flashy woman in hot pink satin!

On the whole, there was a zestful *esprit de corps* among the actors who efficiently doubled and tripled in many parts. Their liveliness and gusto effectively countered the slow rhythm of the first part of the performance, relieving the tedium. Ali El-Haggar – as narrator and Hassan's surrogate – beautifully delivered old songs from the Egyptian popular tradition, particularly Sayed Darwish, as well as new ones composed by Mohamed El-Sheikh. But the performers best efforts and those of the technical crew cannot forestall the question: Since Al-Hanager presented Nageeb Sorour's *Yassin and Baheya* just a year ago, one wonders why this forum, originally intended for new, youthful experiments, is now going for the tried-and-tested crowd-pleasers, namely texts by established playwrights, staged mostly by veteran directors? Could it be nostalgia for the Sixties?

PART II

The Second Wave

Fatheya El-Assal

1933-....

Ducks and Drakes:*

Women's Prison

Nowadays, few playwrights adhere to the concept of theatre as a public forum. Fatheya El-Assal, however, perhaps because she is a woman living in a third world country, or by dint of her political loyalties as an active member of the Egyptian left since the sixties, still persists in this belief. With her, the political 'message' holds unqualified supremacy and is usually projected with ferocious clarity and blinding conviction. Artistic considerations come second; and although careful to entertain as she preaches and to sugar-coat the bitter pill, El-Assal would ruthlessly sacrifice them if they threatened to blur or muddle the issue in hand. All her plays (and they number five) seem to require and, indeed, implicitly call for a specific venue: they would show to best advantage if presented as theatre-cum-discussion events within the precincts of *El-Tagamo*' (the Coalition or Alliance Party) where she has belonged for years. It is a pity that her latest play, *Women's Prison*, which opened at the National last Thursday, missed the Population and Development Conference; it would have served to effectively underline in a popular medium like theatre many of the basic issues raised by the Egyptian Civic Forum and other Non-Governmental Organisations.

A feminist, El-Assal certainly is; but her brand of feminism remains a subsidiary element in a wider political vision. Far from subscribing to the all-men-are-bastards school of feminism, she champions the cause

* 6 October 1991.

of the oppressed, male or female, while maintaining that of all the oppressed of the world, women have the roughest deal. In her private conversations, she never fails to acknowledge the debt she owes to her husband, novelist Abdallah El-Tukhi, and to all the men who helped her along the way. She has no quarrel with men, she consistently reiterates; the arch villain is the totalitarian system (alternatively dubbed by her as "the rule of the military"). That female oppression is a direct result of political male oppression is an article of faith with her. This affectionate, motherly attitude towards men underlies all her writing (for theatre, radio, or television), providing a soft padding to cushion many of her candid revelations, which explains her popularily with both men and women.

Like many critics, I have always found the task of evaluating El-Assal's writing in purely aesthetic terms completely unmanageable; the connecting points between the earthy female and the political activist, between the passionate feminist and the creative artist, keep shifting; her writing is an organic extension of her genuinely feminine experience and it continuously reshapes and expands it. Her confessional style, muddied, down-to-earth diction, dauntless embracing of sensationalism and declamation, coupled with the seemingly random and episodic structure of her plays, would put the wind up any critic; he or she would feel unbearably prodded and baited to rant either against her or in her favour: there is no middle of the way response.

In *Women's Prison*, El-Assal resorts to the same dramatic formula she effectively used before in her *Women Without Masks* (performed at El-Salam theatre nearly twelve years ago). Plot and linear

development are ditched in favour of a theme-and-variation pattern where we get a succession of confessional monologues, each representing a tragic life history in miniature. The narrator, in most cases, belongs to the down-trodden silent majority — those women whose verbal output, though voluminous, never gets into the printed records of history. Indeed, the recent rowdy controversy over the CNN's film which featured the savage butchery of a young female in the name of circumcision would not have happened had people read or seen El-Assal's older play where one of the four female characters' central monologues focused on this harrowing experience and its psychologically disastrous after effects.

El-Assal's choice of social context – the lower rungs of the economic ladder – and her passionate delight in eavesdropping on the chitchat of their females align her with the Egyptian literary oral tradition. In this tradition, Tawfiq El-Hakim found his first inspirational fount which eventually carried him to the rarefied atmosphere of the academies of France; and it is precisely the same tradition that Hasan El-Gretly's Al-Warsha tilled and cultivated for their *Tides of Night.* El-Assal stumbled upon it instinctively; a self-taught, self-made intellectual who personally fought against great odds, she believes that the most important events in a woman's life are verbal; women may not be able to change history but, at least, they can bear witness to it. Hence the choral structure and commentatory attitude of her plays.

As in the *Arabian Nights*, in *Women's Prison*, a central consciousness relays to us the adventures of the characters. But, unlike Sheherazade, El-Assal's Salwa – a journalist and writer, like herself — undergoes a transformation. She and her friend Laila provide not only

the thread on which all the monologues of the prisoners are strung, but also a self-critical focus on the events. A staunch leftist, El-Assal has given in this, her most recent play, the most invalidating criticism anyone has dared throw at the Egyptian 'Left'. In a confrontation scene between her theatrical persona, Salwa, the journalist, and a young university graduate, El-Assal candidly admits the failure of the Egyptian Leftist project. The wonderful and electric Wafa' Sadiq asks El-Assal's persona, Magda El-Khateeb, why, if you have been fighting for the oppressed, are there still such people as the inhabitants of this prison (which bespells Egypt)? El-Assal's answer, bodied forth in her characters, particularly Laila and Salwa, is that she could not but acknowledge, like most of her generation, the moral dichotomy and ideological split personality of the educated Egyptian middle classes.

Throughout the play, the politically innocent and naive Laila, who gets accidentally embroiled in politics (though she had resigned herself to a life of marital slavery after her father's death, opting for a patriarchal substitute in an unconscionable businessman), desperately fights the truth. Looking like a travesty of a woman, a painted doll with heavy make-up and a blonde wig, in a revealing evening dress that barely hides the many bruises caused by her husband's wife-battering sprees, she stuns us at the end with a veritable *coup de theatre*. When the chips are down and all is lost, she tears off her wig to display a wonderful mop of black hair: a dramatic way of demonstrating the refusal to be untrue to herself any longer.

A play with such an obvious moral (or message) could easily seem simplistically didactic, verbose and downright boring. That it did not is due not only to the earthy authenticity of El-Assal's dialogue, her vivid

characterization and the wild assortment of lively, loud females she parades on stage, but also to her choice of cast. Picking some of the most talented young graduates of the Theatre Institute provided the play, not with the usual collection of primping and preening primadonnas, but with sincere young people truly believing in what they said.

It was a great pleasure to see actress Magda El-Khateeb once more, after her long years of involuntary exile in Morocco, and to enjoy the vibrant presence of actress Sawsan Badr who two years ago decided to wear the veil, but has recently rejected it. The fact that once upon a time she was banned from circulation in all the Arab media on account of her acting the star role in the vociferously damned film, *The Death of a Princess* (which featured the stoning to death of a Saudi princess who had dared marry outside the royal family), made her iconoclastic denouncements of the current ideology ring true. And despite the elaborate, structuralist stage design of Salah Hafiz, Adel Hashim's sophisticated lighting and direction and Hamdi Ra'oof's soft incidental music, the painful rawness of El-Assal's writing was relentelessly present.

Nabil Badran

1941-....

A Flash in Menya:*
Pardon Ancestors

The journey was wearisome, with many stops, but the occasion was worth it: a performance of a play the banning of which had caused an uproar in Cairo three years ago. And where? In the beleagured governorate of Menya. I was in the middle of writing about the Amman Theatre Festival when the invitation came. How could I resist it? The Amman story had to wait. With a light overnight bag I hopped on the 10 o'clock train in the company of Nabil Badran, the author of the banned *Pardon Ancestors* (Afwan Ayyuha Al-Agdad).

It was my first trip to *La belle* of Upper Egypt, as El-Menya city is often called, and Badran's too. At the station, we missed our expected escort. Looking around, I thought it must have been recently renovated; it looked clean and cheerful and the sight of an unveiled female head here and there reassured me. It being my first visit, I had debated with myself the donning of a scarf and discarded the idea.

Outside, we fruitlessly hunted for a taxi. We didn't know then that taxis are unknown in El-Menya. The city is so small the service would be redundant. We walked for a bit, feeling lost, then stopped to ask directions. A red micro-bus suddenly pulled up at our side and a boyish voice hawked "the university". We quickly clambered in. At last we were on the way to our destination, or so we thought. We never imagined that for the next two hours after the busride we would be wandering on foot looking for The College of Arabic Studies where the

* 20 April 1995.

performance was to take place that evering. The bus had dropped us at the gate of The Faculty of Arts; but it transpired that the College was on the main campus and we were shown a short-cut; it proved, literally, a mile long. Those people have a queer sense of distance.

At the end of the dusty track, with a high brick wall on one side and the road on the other and beyond it the Nile, we took a turning to the left and the campus exploded into view. I understood then why a mile was a short-cut. It was huge, spreading over a vast expanse of acreage, with a lot of construction work still going on. Some of the new buildings, it was explained to us later, had collapsed or been damaged during the last earthquake and are waiting to be pulled down or being repaired. This explained the odd sight of so many unfinished or deserted new buildings. Nevertheless, the sections of the campus which withstood the tremor looked extremely elegant, with long, spacious avenues intersecting them, and plenty of grass and young trees.

As we trudged along we kept asking students and being pointed in different directions. We didn't know then that the college building had been one of the tremor's casualties and that it had been temporarily housed in several different buildings. Our saviour finally appeared in the shape of the conductor of a gaily red, train-shaped, electric-powered coach. Its sight solved a mystery for me. All along, I had been wondering what if a person had no stomach or stamina for walk-a-thon?

When we finally tracked him down, Dr. Mohamed Rahuma, the elusive dean, proved worth the hunt. He is cheerful, warm and courteous and still in his forties. This explained the sense of urgent vitality and unbounded energy he communicated. At that moment,

however, the last thing I wanted was an energetic host. I was famished and badly needed a wash. But no way. Dr. Rahuma knew we were leaving the following morning and was anxious to display before our tired Cairene eyes the enlightened cultural activities of his students.

He shephereded us into a students exhibition of art and handicrafts held in a long hall at the opposite side of the building. Everywhere, there was the general air of clutter and untidiness characteristic of moving in or out. We spent half an hour there and I found the students more interesting and inspiring than the exhibits. Their enthusiastic welcome was touching and I suddenly realized how culturally neglected the young people of Upper Egypt must feel. As one student succinctly put it: "here, we feel like *fifth* world citizens." Another complained "away from the university, nothing ever happens. We are great readers because there is nothing else to do. The one Cultural Home which was once a hive of activity is now ruled over by the worst type of bureaucratic philistines who think the word culture is synonymous with Marxism."

Currently, the governor's only concern is security and, in the process, he is unwisely alienating the enlightened section of the population who feel caught in the crossfire between an uncaring government and the inimical fundamentalists. This is a dangerous situation which has to be immediately remedied. A serious and far-reaching cultural campaign has to be started at once in the governorates of Upper Egypt and, indeed, in all the provinces before many more of our towns and regional districts reach the tragic state of Malawi. There, some villages have to live with a 24 hour curfew; the luckier town-dwellers become prisoners in their homes from four in the

afternoon until nine the following morning. How long can people tolerate such rigours? I cannot help thinking that mass punishment of this type will prove, in the long run, counterproductive. There must be a better way of rooting out terrorism, and the lesson the government has yet to learn is that you cannot fight fundamentalism simply with guns.

This is what makes the cultural programme adopted by the College of Arabic Studies in El-Menya so valuable. It includes lectures, seminars, discussions with enlightened Islamic thinkers, cultural figures and media men; there are also concerts, art exhibitions, poetry evenings and theatrical performances. The cultural season, however, is all too short and insufficient, by itself, to provide intellectual stimulation and nourishment for the vigorous population of this beautiful city. It is about time the Cultural Palaces Authority did something about the dreary dump of a place it calls a *maison de culture.*

In the evening, after a lovely lunch of stuffed pigeons at a restaurant with an enchanting view of the Nile and the hills of the western bank, followed by a short rest at the university's guest-house, it was time for theatre. The events of the day and its revelations had proved intensely dramatic, but I still looked forward to the performance.

The university has one large, open-air theatre flanked on either side by two smaller, covered ones which serve as lecture-halls as well. As we stepped into one of those, I was awed and over-whelmed by the size of the audience. It was literally packed, with people squeezed against each other on the long, tiered benches. I noted happily that the majority were young and that nearly half of them were females. They sat separately, as might well be expected, and most of them were veiled.

Still, they had come to see a play and had been allowed to stay out late (the discussion that followed the show lasted until nearly midnight).

The banning of *Pardon Ancestors* had been a foolish censorial decision which at the time infuriated everybody. It was argued at the time that the state could not finance the production of a play that ran counter to its policies. It was read as an anti-peace political lampoon. The curious thing is that a year before it had won the minor state award for best published play of the year. But this cut no ice with the Public Censor. The production was stopped, causing a scandal. The banning won the play and its author the sympathies of everybody, including those who thought it of dubious artistic merit, too simplistic, or downright wrong-headed.

The play is made up of a string of sharply-etched satirical sketches, with parodies and grotesques, in the manner of the old political cabaret. It is a style Badran adopts in all his plays. The setting is an imaginary state which has decided to turn over a new leaf in its relations with its former enemy. To enforce the peace, the rulers ban the use of all weapons, including children's toy guns, forbid the use of names denoting strength, vengeance, anger or valour, forcing people to adopt their opposites, and seek to completely obliterate the memory of former glories and past conquests. Two families, however, refuse to change their ancestral names and their resistance triggers a long series of terrible persecutions. Badran uses the stereotypes of popular comedy and many of its verbal devices and plays them for all their comical worth. At many points, however, there are startling shifts of tone when the play suddenly plunges into sentimentality or empty heroics. Badran also forces an embarassingly optimistic end in which all the exiled dissidents, whom we had come to look upon so far as strip-cartoon

figures, burst out in force, waving their swords. The most disturbing aspect of the play, however, is its facilely romantic veneration of the past and the absence of any critical appraisal.

Fortunately, the students' production, which rewrote the play in colloquial Arabic, injected many songs, and slightly altered the end, making it more ambiguous, went a long way towards mending the faults of the text. Even the blind reverence for the past was ironically undercut when stage-designer Izz Eddin Kamal alternated a sketch representing a cell at the back with a sketch of a ludicrously ferocious-looking ancestor. Alternatively, he covered the head of a large white pigeon symbolizing peace with an iron chain running around its outline. Peace was not rejected by the performance; but it has to be a fair and just peace between equals.

As with most student performances, there was some ham acting, some aping of popular actors and a lot of bad voice-production. But who cares? The actors' zest and their vitality were electrifying and the response of the young audience was immediate, uproarious and exhilarating. Here in El-Menya, theatre has a different taste.

Nadia El-Banhawi

1944-....

Fanning the Embers:*

The Glow

Until last night I had complacently (if somewhat enviously) assumed that all constraints on the freedom of thought and expression had been removed in Britain. Suddenly, though, a startling news-story on the B.B.C. told me of the existence of some hoary blasphemy law which dates back from the 12th century and which is still in operation (talk of British clinging to tradition!). This law has been brought to the attention of the media recently because of a legal action brought by the producers of a 17-minute video-film banned some years ago under this law. Sporting the enticing title *Visions of Ecstasy*, it featured Jesus Christ erotically conceived in a series of images by some nun. The film, as many critics affirm, may never prove a best-seller; but so far, it has won enough notoriety to occasion a heated controversy over this blasphemy law. When I heard some bishop defend it, I was vividly reminded of the passionate rage of many British Muslims during the *Satanic Verses* frenzied row who, upon demanding that this law be invoked against Salman Rushdi, were told that it applied only to blasphemy against Christianity.

In Egypt, I am assured, both our Islamic and secular laws forbid the representation, either on stage or screen, of all the prophets mentioned in the Koran — together with their progenitors, descendants or disciples; all are regarded as holy and, therefore, taboo figures. This must include the representation of Christ, one naturally assumes. And

* 4 April 1996.

yet, I remember as a child, back in the distant fifties, watching many films on the life of Jesus Christ during Christmas and Easter; they were shown at a popular movie house in Shubra — then, a predominantly coptic and cosmopolitan quarter of Cairo. I grew up taking the representation of Jesus and all other sacred Christian figures for granted and was quite taken aback one day when it suddenly struck me that all such films had mysteriously disappeared from our cinemas. It is not clear to me yet (though I have tried hard to clarify the matter) whether it was the Public Censor or the Coptic community who effected this unpublicised ban. But whatever the case, it simply does not make sense. Aren't all our churches and monasteries full of representations of Christ, the Virgin and a plethora of saints and disciples?!

But ban or no ban, since the fifties, and may be earlier, Christ, dressed in many guises, has provided some of our best dramatists and directors with a potent dramatic and visual symbol for all saviours (of whatever denomination) and all rebellious, persecuted and victimised heroes. Indeed, at the end of his first play, *Murder in Baghdad*, Salah Abdel-Sabour had his hero, the Muslim Sufi rebel El-Hallaj, crucified, Christ-like, on a tree, and the figure of Jesus overshadows his last play, *When the King is Dead.* More recently, the Shrapnel group's *Briaska II*, which revolves round the persecution of Christians in the ancient city of Taurus, seriously discomfited the Censor's representative on account of a line saying "I often dream of being Jesus Christ." She was livid and threatened to ban the play but was finally persuaded by Huda Wasfi, the director of Al-Hanager Centre where the offending show took place, that the line simply expressed an innocent wish; *Briaska II* wasn't axed.

It was again under the protection of the brave and enlightened Wasfi that another play featuring the Messiah (in very thin disguise) made its way to the stage. *The Glow*, Nadia El-Banhawi's first venture into the wild and rocky terrain of play-writing was hosted by Wasfi in the National's space upstairs for four weeks last month. The play, originally (and quite ominously as it turned out) called *The Narrow Path*, was at first denied license for public performance on account of its iconoclastic (though extremely loving and respectful) representation of the Saviour.

In fact, the play is extremely pious in its general drift and imbued with a deep religious sense. It is a sensitive reworking of the old, traditional theme of the spiritual quest for salvation in a parabolic, quasi-surrealistic, quasi-expressionistic form. It begins with the frightened and desperate heroine, Rawa (note the symbolic name which derives from the Arabic for the verb "to water"), lost in a lonely, terrifying urban maze of dark alleys, deserted streets and vast, empty squares. In trying to find her way home she stumbles upon a small boy who gives her confusing directions which, eventually, lead her into a dark pathway (hence the original title). There she encounters a grotesque community of cannibals given to feasting on human flesh and wine while constantly mouthing and spitting the Christian slogans of charity, love and sharing. When she refuses to partake of the food offered to her and rejects this travesty of the Lord's Supper, she is first tortured then raped by their leader after a mock wedding ceremony and under the gloating eyes of the leader's ghoulish wife. The small boy materialises mysteriously once more to give more directions and another nightmarish sequence follows where she meets a dying musician with a

broken violin among the ruins of a devastated city. In the final sequence, this musician re-emerges as the Saviour.

It is this final sequence which proved a stumbling block for the text in terms of censorship. Whoever read the play for licensing purposes must have been flabbergasted by this particular representation of the Saviour. He appears as a cynical, embittered and disillusioned youngman who sneers at his sacrifice; it has achieved nothing, for the world remains as horrible, ugly and barbaric as he left it. He feels conned, and that humanity has fed and battened on his flesh and blood, growing ever greedier and more tyrannical. He declares to Rawa that he has found his own personal salvation away from all myths, creeds and dogmas, and urges her to do the same, offering to show her the way.

The road to salvation he points to, however, is shrouded in mystery and paradox: it involves a ritualistic last supper of ale and cakes (which counterpoints the earlier flesh and wine feast and derives from some ancient Egyptian funerary rites), a magic lamp (reminiscent of Aladdin's) on which she must blow strongly to fan its flame with her breath, and, finally, vanishing into the glow of the burning flame. As Rawa is consumed by the light one wonders: is it salvation or burning? Freedom or extinction? But the end is left teasingly ambiguous and the mesh of Biblical echoes and images point in different directions: to "the valley of the shadow of death" (Pslams: 23: 4), to "The people that walked in darkness" then saw "a great light" (Isaiah: 9: 2), to the Lord's annointment in Bethany at the leper's house and his later betrayal (Matthew: 26: 6-13), and to the "bread of adversity" (Isaiah: 30: 20), etc.

No wonder the play in its original version was rejected and had to be toned down and modified to gain a licence. It had even to be renamed to get a second reading after amendation. Still, despite the many regrettable ommissions, it remains a haunting and exciting piece of writing, and director Abbas Ahmed did his best with an extremely humble budget to create the necessary claustrophobic, nightmarish atmosphere. But though the acting was generally competent and at times quite moving, it lacked the glow of inspiration. May the lure of Christ continue to inspire more writers and to baffle and confound all censors.

Strangers in the Night:*

The Lost Melody

Plays by women are a rare phenomenon on the Egyptian stage. This alone would make Nadia El-Banhawi's *The Lost Melody* (at El-Tali'a) a welcome addition to Egyptian drama. But *The Lost Melody* is also an intriguing work, with a very special flavour. Like her two previous plays – *The Glow* (staged at the National Upstairs) and *Love and Death Sonata* (at El-Tali'a) – both directed by Abbas Ahmed, it departs from the familiar, well-trodden paths of dramatic writing in Egypt and explores those tenuous, shadowy, elusive areas of human experience normally consecrated to the realms of myth and poetry.

"Grasping at shadows" would best describe the content of all three pieces. *The Glow*, which bristles with biblical allusions, features a surrealistic descent into purgatory in search of salvation – spiritual, existential and even political. The setting is the valley of death and the images of the last supper and a cannibalistic banquet are counterpointed in a harrowing irony. The end is teasingly ambiguous: is the glow which suffuses the stage in a sudden brilliant eruption in the final scene a raging fire which obliterates everything? or a light which dispels the awful darkness of the nether regions of the soul and cleanses the deepest recesses of a seared historical memory? In *Sonata* the setting is more realistic and less gruesome; but the sense of spiritual desolation is equally intense and the themes of loss and bereavement are all pervasive. On a lonely seashore, a female painter – heavily reminiscent

* 1 May 2003.

of the painter in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* – struggles vainly to finish the painting which she believes would enable her finally to make sense of her failed life and of the many existential questions which bedevil her. The sea becomes a symbol of the sense of absurdity which threatens to engulf her and its waves, as they crash on the shore, throw at her the debris of broken hopes and relationships and many ghosts.

The sea also haunts the fictional world of *The Lost Melody*; and though the setting is vaguely realistic – the bar of a deserted seaside hotel on a cold night in winter – the frame of reference is not quotidian reality but literature, painting and classical music. The mood is more lyrical than dramatic, the verbal texture is densely allusive and intertextual and the structure is modelled on polyphonic music. A chance meeting between a violinist, Elise, and a pianist and budding composer, Nabil, with wine to loosen the gates of memory, yields two interesting, contrapuntal monologues which conjure up two absent figures: her former lover, a painter, and his ex-wife, a frail, doting, pathetic creature. Each is desperately trying to bypass the past and find a new link in the present; but the more they try to get closer to each other, the farther away they are drawn apart by the ghosts of their lost loved ones.

As in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, nothing can be saved or recovered and the action takes the form of a gradual tragic revelation of the fragility of human relationships, the illusory nature of time and the essential loneliness of the human condition. Despite the taut Aristotelian structure (the unity of time, place and action and the coincidence of performance and fictional dramatic time, in the sense that the duration of

the performance is exactly the same as that of the meeting between Elise and Nabil), as the past invades and takes over the present, time and space become unsettlingly fluid and all attempts at communication or any sort of action are inevitably doomed. To the question why love fails, on which the play hinges, neither character can find an answer. But of the consequences we are left in no doubt. El-Banhawi plants in the background of the play Beethoven's piano bagatelle *For Elise* and pointedly makes her heroine, Elise, mention to her companion that it was an elegy by Beethoven for the dead daughter of one of his friends. Living in the shadow of the past, Elise, we gradually discover, is hardly alive. What has remained of her is an elegiac melody; and when she pronounces at the end that she stands all alone, totally bereft of all illusions, she becomes a poignant image of the living-dead.

Staging a play of this kind can be an ordeal, especially for a young director making his debut in the professional theatre. When Intisar Abdel-Fattah, the artistic director of El-Tali'a, proposed it to Amr Qabil, the latter "froze with terror," as he confesses. His apprenticeship as an amateur director at the French Cultural Centre had been in comedy and burlesque. But the offer could not be resisted and to get into mainstream, professional theatre, Qabil accepted the challenge and this terrible make-or-break risk. Happily for him and for El-Banhawi, Caroline khalil was at hand, available and willing to take on Elise. In the hands of an actress of less talent, sensitivity, culture and technical sophistication, the character – completely unfamiliar in the Egyptian repertoire of female parts – would have seemed strange and hopelessly impenetrable. Caroline handled it with subtlety, passionate reserve and superb attention to mood and rhythm. Like a well-groomed singer

assigned the lead in an intricate quartet, she led the rest of the cast (Ashraf, Shereef and Shatsi), orchestrating their performances, filling in the gaps, making up for the lapses and steering them clear of the pitfalls of melodrama and sentimentalism.

Amr Qabil was also lucky in his choice of Mohamed Abdel-Mon'im as set designer. Dressing up the whole of Salah Abdel Sabour's hall at El-Tali'a (a chamber theatre) in soft, white gauze, with a live guitarist on one side (Mohamed Darwish), a bar in the middle and tables and chairs for the audience to make them share the same fictional space as the actors was an excellent idea. It created the sense of intimacy and the kind of vague, dreamy atmosphere essential for this kind of play. The whole space wore the aspect of a shadowy tunnel with an unfinished painting at the far end (by Khalid El-Halabi), split in the middle, representing a woman and her silhouette. The few steps on one side led to an isolated, veiled area, as if suspended in mid air, where the heroine withdraws at the end to make her final pronouncement, and the rocking chair in front of it, where the characters alternately vainly sought comfort by rhythmically rocking themselves was a poignant touch. So was the old gramophone facing it on the other side. The sea, the live guitar, a nostalgic, old, thirties tune, as well as Beethoven and Chopin provided a stirring and structurally active musical background. At the end, as the action doubles back on itself and the striving to overcome loneliness ironically leads to its irredeemable confirmation, with no prospect of a sudden liberating glow, however dubious, each of the audience is left with him/herself to trace, in this rich, enigmatic audiovisual mosaic, the faint notes of old, forgotten melodies.

Leila Abdel-Basit

1942-....

A Sign of the Times:*

After a Long Absence

I cannot make up my mind whether it is fear of real censorship or our present cripplingly repressive cultural climate or some invisible, internal censor lurking somewhere in the folds of Layla Abdel-Basit's brain which intimidated this promising playwright into producing the kind of drivel currently on show at the National Theatre Under the title *After a Long Ansence*.

The piece is supposed to be the final part of a trilogy she started nearly four years ago about the ordeals and deprivations, social and personal, of the split family (with the father working somewhere in the oil-rich Gulf and the mother left behind to cope with the children and fight down her sexuality) – a relatively new experience for Egyptians. What a gold mine of a subject! – one that is bound to touch a sensitive chord somewhere in most Egyptian families. The choice between unemployment, coupled with celibacy and a harsh, ascetic existence on the one hand and self-imposed exile and loneliness (despite the erratic bouts of sexual indulgence during the fleeting annual leave) is a painfully real one for most Egyptian youths whatever their walks of life. And in this respect, the university graduate – not very much in demand on the job market these days – fares much worse than a tinker, a mechanic or an agricultural labourer; as likely as not, he may waste away his best years chasing after an illusory work-contract in the land of the 'black gold'.

The women, on the other hand, educated or illiterate, have to resign themselves to a life of eternal waiting; against all natural impulses, they

have to preserve their chastity and constantly guard against gossip and temptation. Is it any wonder that many of them hide behind the veil or even the *niqab*?!

It must be admitted that in the first two parts of the trilogy Abdel Basit aquitted herself well, plumbing some of the depths of the problems. In the first part, *The Pain of Separation*, a one-man show, she gave us the husband's point of view of the problem; his forty-minute monologue communicated to us quite vividly his terrible loneliness, his excruciating feeling of humiliation and haunting fear of losing his virility. He looked and felt like a man struggling desperately to find a secure foothold in a sea of quick sand and holding on to some pitifully frayed shreds of old and distant memories.

In the second half of the trilogy, *The Price of Exile*, it was the turn of the lonely wife, superbly performed by Madiha Hamdi at the National Upstairs before she, together with the authoress, took on the veil! Fortunately, however, at that time, Layla Abdel Basit, without actually infringing the taboo on the expression of female sexuality, managed to negotiate her way into many a dark and silent area of female experience. There was real pain here and real frustration — a tragic sense of the waste of years, of being suspended in time, always waiting. The small hall of the National Upstairs, dominated by an empty four-poster bed, became a cell infested with the delusions of a lonely, aging woman, slowly falling apart.

The four-poster bed was also present in the final part, *After a Long Absence*, but this time it was shoved to the back of the considerably larger stage of the National's main auditorium. Besides, it was no longer empty. On it was the long-absent, long-awaited husband, freshly

arrived from the Gulf. Conspicuously on a table nearby lay the fruits of his labour, nestling cosily at the bottom of a large Samsonite bag. The wife, in a pink, frilly nightgown, paced up and down restlessly. Fine so far and bursting with possibilities, especially since the husband looked at first as if he was wearing a *Galabeya* – a male alternative to a pair of pyjamas on hot nights in the east.

Soon enough, however, the air of suspense was shattered with a string of squelchy, sentimental songs emitting from the wife, accompanied with a lot of dainty prancing. Coyly, she sang of her "emotional" and "spiritual" longings while her gestures intimated longings of quite a different order. When at one point she picked a rose and started tickling her husband with it, the romantic cliches which had been accumulating became quite insufferable and embarrassingly hollow. Mercifully, the stage is suddenly plunged in darkness; but before we could heave a sigh of relief, they are back on again and we are tortured with yet another series of cloying romantic cliches, this time in the form of flashbacks of happy scenes from the past. These are performed by the husband and wife (now in youthful gear – hence the blackout) behind a white gauze curtain – presumably to hide their ages in the interest of make-believe. But by this time the audience's willing suspension of disbelief has been taxed to the utmost and the sentimentality and pallidness of the writing has robbed the characters of all credibility.

When the husband finally does wake up (but not before we are treated to another explosion of songs) we discover that he was actually sleeping in his out of door clothes. The point scored here is that for Egyptian men the *Galabeya* has become the male equivalent of the

female veil, bespeaking a similar ideological outlook and frame of mind. A perceptive remark, perhaps, but then what? Nothing. For the rest of the play which lasted what seemed an interminable hour and a half, the husband dashed nervously around, acted jumpily for no apparent reason, answered a couple of mysterious telephone calls from his partner, conspicuously evaded his wife's amorous advances, then suddenly announced that he was leaving again for a month on business.

Whatever ideas Abdel Basit had concerning this character never actually left her mind, and I doubt very much if Ashraf Abdel Ghafour – usually a competent and convincing actor – had the slightest clue as to why he was kept supine half the play and knocking against the furniture the other half! He was faced with the insurmountable task of building a character out of dead cliches, impatient groans and the occasional bark. Nor could he look for any help from his partner: the graceful Nadia Rashad had enough troubles of her own; neither the words or the songs she was given seemed to fit the situation or to pave the way for her violently abrupt changes of mood.

Intent on handling reality with a pair of pink satin gloves and steering clear of any murky, muddied puddles, Abdel Basit had to resort to a lot of shillyshallying. That is why she had to resort to yet another dramatic cliche to wind up what had become an obstinately static situation: suddenly the telephone rings; one of the children is in trouble with the police; the husband feels helpless and starts gyrating at a feverish pace; the wife freezes ominously and asks for a divorce. By this time, however, neither her protracted 'longings' nor her sudden rebellion really matter. Both seem unreal and incomprehensible.

It is conceivable, of course, that Abdel Basit wanted originally to produce a play of moods and states of mind, and Zoser Marzouq's direction and his stage-set carry a hint of that. But if this was the case, she should never have opted for a realistic style. Her dramatic strategy left her hanging in mid air, erratically swinging between realism, melodrama and romance. She sadly spoilt what seemed initially a hotly topical issue and a deeply relevant dramatic situation. The end was tragic: not for the two characters who never transcended the status of puppets, but for the actors and the poor audience.

Ra'fat El-Dweri

1937-....

Sinbad the Sailor:*

Strung up by the Ankle!

Five years ago, after a chequered career as director, mostly staging his own plays, Ra'fat El-Dweri was nominated for the most-promising-dramatist-of-the-year annual state award. *Cat With Seven Lives* (available in English through GEBO – The General Egyptian Book Organisation) which won him the nomination is typical of his distinctive experimental mode of dramatic composition. Rejecting realism and the well-made play, Dweri, after a few forays into expressionism, has consciously and studiously developed a type of drama that is at once undisguisedly theatrical (he has constant recourse to the play-within-the-play formula) and firmly rooted in the Egyptian popular tradition. In play after play we find him increasingly drawing on myth, fable and folklore, reverting time and again to the consecrated themes of fertility, death and resurrection with their associated complex and time-hallowed rituals.

In *Cat With Seven Lives*, for instance, he sets a Pharaonic mystery play – a sacred ritualistic drama about Osiris, the god of fertility – at the heart of a contemporary peasant drama of everyday life and concerns. In an earlier play, *The Shrewd Knave (El-Fahlawan)*, he sought inspiration in the Arabic *Maqamat* – an old literary form of short prose narratives regarded by some as the precursor of the Western shortstory. From collections of such stories (by Al-Hariri and Al-Hamazani) he drew themes, characters, atmosphere and language and hosted them in a theatrical form modelled on the episodic and rambling structure of the

* January 1991.

Maqamat, creating what might be called a picaresque play in which ritual and ceremony mingle with various native forms of popular entertainment. There, the seemingly random succession of scenes and episodes is given shape by the clown-cum-picaro hero. When Dweri reworked the play a few years later, he added to its already dizzying array of rogues and witches, story-tellers and strolling actors, street dancers, acrobats and jugglers, a colourful Pharaonic pageant – a testimony to the openness and versatility of the form.

Dweri's latest venture, *Strung up by the Ankle*, which he, true to his customary practice, has himself recently directed for El-Tali'a (avant-garde) theatre, is not so much a mining of the same vein as an attempt to integrate his earlier expressionistic techniques with the picaresque form of play he developed later. Invoking another old popular literary source, the famous *Arabian Nights*, he fishes out the character of Sinbad the Sailor and casts him, in jeans and a blue shirt, at the mouth of a cave, at once suggestive of a bird of prey and a womb. The scene is a rocky shore whose sole inhabitants are an old, ugly and sexually rapacious witch, a handful of guards and ghosts (masked dancers), and a crippled figure from the distant past of the tales, complete with beard and turban. This figure, who is saddled with a grotesque inflated rubber doll resembling the witch, is, presumably, the old doppelganger of the modern Sinbad, and a young woman, who is added later on, completes the cast.

The huge and menacing rock formations, executed in shades of brown and copper against a blue and green backdrop for sea and sky, lend the stage an eerie and desolate atmosphere and become positively frightening as they start to close in on the hero or as they interlock to

form a massive mountain. At certain points these mobile structures vanish into the wings and flies, clearing the stage for symbolic airy ballet sequences or for a surrealistically rendered spaceship scene with dancing crows, a high spiral metal ladder and weird lighting.

A swivel chair (the witch's throne) occupies the mouth of the cave with a mask of Sinbad's face conspicuous on its back, while the prow of Sinbad's wrecked vessel, with his famous telescope mounted on it, is visible at intervals on the left.

The play unfolds in a series of evocative if sometimes baffling images that seem to rise, merge, separate, divide and proliferate in a dream-like manner. They take us on a nightmarish voyage into the mind of Sinbad who is revealed as the prototype of man seeking his salvation and torn between his half-dust and half-deity sides, between the spirit and the flesh, and all it is heir to, in Hamlet's words, or to use Freudian jargon, between his dark Id and Super-ego. In a vivid scene, this conflict is rendered visually as Sinbad gets caught in a fierce tug-of-war between the young woman at the top of the mountain who tries to pull him up, and the old witch at its foot straining to pull him down. Sinbad continues to vacillate between the two extremes until he finally succeeds in recreating himself in a ritualistic birth-scene in which the young woman plays midwife amidst the hero's shrieks and groans, and a coiled rope represents the new self, born out of the old.

After a brief relapse, Sinbad triumphs over the witch, forcing her to strip off her masks, which she does in a grotesque striptease dance. Finally, dark and naked (in a black leotard), she reveals her face: it is (surprise!) Sinbad's. At this moment, whether for symbolic reasons or due to shock, Simbad's old double falls dead, dropping his doll, and is

dragged off stage by the unmasked witch, now wearing the mask of Sinbad. The play ends with an ironic twist when the young woman, Sinbad's spiritual guide, suddenly slips into the part of the witch, lulling him to sleep with a bedtime story only to tie him up with the same rope that had earlier ominously represented his newly born self. She slips off stage, holding the end of the tope, leaving him in a forest of masks of his own face.

Visually a treat, with its exciting proliferation of masks, its imaginative costumes and harmonious blend of colour, lighting and movement configurations, the performance nevertheless suffers from a verbal over-bloating in parts and general symbolic flatulence; to the symbols already mentioned you may add the Hanged Man's card in fortune-telling packs, which gives the play its title, and that of the drowned Phoenician sailor, obliquely referred to, which evokes in turn "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante" in Eliot's *Waste Land*. The acting, however, more than made up for these flaws with master performances from the versatile Abdel-Rahman Abu Zahra as Sinbad and Awatif Hilmi as the witch, played with impressive gusto and well-studied grotesquerie.

Gyntish Design:*

El-Fahlawan

In *Peer Gynt* (1867), Ibsen's larky last play in verse, the eponymous picaroon finds himself in Egypt in Act IV, facing the statue of Memnon at dawn; thereupon he declares: "Now, for a change, I've become an Egyptian, though one of essentially Gyntish design."

These words should have prefaced Ra'fat El-Dweri's play, *El-Fahlawan* (1986), by way of an epigraph. The pithy title — made up of a combination of the first two syllables of the Egyptian colloquial word *Fahlawi*, meaning a sharp trickster or shrewd knave or con man, and the last two syllables of the word *Bahlawan*, the Arabic for clown or harlequin — refers to a hero (or anti-hero) who has obvious ancestral linkages with a long line of clever servants in old Roman comedy, with the *commedia dell'arte* harlequins and the many roguish popular heroes of Egyptian and Arab folk narratives. As such, he strikes one at first sight as a dramatic creation inspired by Yusef Idris's concept of *El-Farfoor* (the clever underling) which he first outlined in a series of three articles entitled *Towards an Arab theatre*, published in 1964, then bodied forth in his famous play *El-Farafeer.*

Indeed, both the subtitle of El-Dweri's play, which draws the attention of the reader to the old literary tradition of the Arabic *Maqamat* (short, disconnected narratives linked by the same narrator) as its major source of inspiration, and the author's dedication of the play to veteran theatre critic, Dr Ali El-Ra'i (who first alerted us to the dramatic

* 31 October 1996.

possibilities inherent in the Arabic *Maqamat*, in El-Dweri's words), strengthen the impression that the text is yet another experimental dive into the indigenous literary heritage in search of authentic, original dramatic forms. In its verbal texture too, the script bristles with allusions to and quotations from a plethora of Arabic texts which date back to the middle ages and before (ranging from the shadow-plays of Ibn Danial to Al-Hamazani's *Maqamat*, Ibn Iyas's historical account, *Bada'i Al-Zuhuur* — meaning Choicest Flowers — and The Arabian Nights), and is dotted here and there with bits of ancient ballads, ritualistic incantations and popular songs.

Nevertheless, despite this rich folkloric material and strong local veneer, and notwithstanding El-Dweri's division of the play — or *Maqa-massrahyah*, as he calls it — into four *Maqamat*, rather than acts or scenes, *El-Fahlawan* remains essentially an ingenious reworking of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* or, rather, its first two acts. From them, El-Dweri draws character, situation, incident and even some of the dialogue. The first scene which reveals El-Fahlawan lying on the parapet of the Qaitbey castle in Alexandria and watching the sky vividly echoes the second scene of Act I in *Peer Gynt* where the hero "throws himself on a bank of heather, and lies for a long time on his back with his hands behind his head, staring into the sky," while El-Fahlawan's words: "Oh, what a cloud! It sails across the sky like a royal boat," are almost a replica of Peer Gynt's: "That's a funny shaped cloud — why it's just like a horse." For both heroes it is the prelude to a glorious fantasy in which one of them sees himself as Emperor Peer and the other as Sultan Habshan (El-Fahlawan's first name which literally means in Arabic 'snatcher'). The scene between Peer Gynt and his shrewish, scolding mother, Aase, which opens Ibsen's play, becomes scene two in

El-Fahlawan, or, rather, the second *Maqamah*, while the kidnapping of Ingrid on her wedding night, the desecration of her honour and subsequent abandonment in Ibsen's play provide the narrative line for El-Dweri's two remaining acts, or *Maqamat*.

The obvious similarities notwithstanding, one cannot simply dismiss *El-Fahlawan* as a clever copy or adaptation of *Peer Gynt*. Rather, it engages Ibsen's play in a kind of dialogic interaction designed to crack the code of the original play and recast it in systems of reference that have the same heightened possibility of meaning (in connection to a sense of national and historical identity) for an Egyptian audience. In contrast to Ibsen's timeless setting of wild hills and mountains, *El-Fahlawan* is set in the lanes and alleys of the poorest quarters of Alexandria during a time of famine in the Mameluke era; the political denotation is inescapable. And whereas Ibsen saves the soul of his sinful hero at the end through the redeeming love of the saintly Solveig, El-Dweri accords his knavish El-Fahlawan no such blessing; indeed, by unifying Ibsen's Ingrid and Solveig into one female character, called Zumurruda (Emerald), who becomes at once the object of El-Fahlawan's love and the victim of his ruthless betrayal, El-Dweri not only irrevocably damns his hero, but also manages to transform him into a symbol of political and moral chicanery. Starting with the same premises as *Peer Gynt*, *El-Fahlawan* sets about consciously disrupting them. What it ultimately calls into question is not the possibility of the hero's redemption, but the romantic concept of the popular hero as such — as charming rogue, kindly outlaw, honest highwayman and lusty womaniser. Our folk tales, sagas and *Siras* are full of such heroes and I think it is about time someone took a long, hard look at them and gave us a different reading of their characters.

With a highly theatrical hero, given to self-dramatisation and endless yarn-spinning, it was natural that El-Dweri should opt for an openly theatrical technique and mode of writing. Central to the play's structure is the presence of a troupe of wandering actors and entertainers who constantly pit their wits against the hero and try to outdo his cunning; in performing their tricks, they naturally use a lot of disguise. But even when they are off stage, the act of impersonation is carried on by other characters. Indeed, every act (or *Maqamah*) involves at least one play-within-the-play, and sometimes there are as many as three or four; and not all of them are performed with live actors. In the second *Maqamah*, for instance, El-Fahlawan uses three big earthenware jars and some stage-props to recreate his fantasy of being a sultan in a council meeting with the top merchants and businessmen of the city.

Such vivid, colourful theatricality is not uncommon in the writing of El-Dweri in general. And when it is not implied in the dialogue, it is indicated by voluminous stage directions. This makes many of his plays read like film scripts and he occasionally alludes to his texts as 'scenarios' for performance. Perhaps this is only to be expected, since El-Dweri is also a theatre director of long standing and as such thinks primarily in images. In the past he preferred to direct his own texts for the stage and the result was frequently visually thrilling, vividly evocative, but deeply mystifying performances. Critics told him that he was too close to the texts and this resulted in opacity. Reluctantly, he gave up the production of his own plays and surrendered the cherished task to others. More often than not, the upshot was not what he, or those who admire his writing, hoped for.

El-Fahlawan premiered at El-Ghad theatre this month in a production directed by Zosar Marzouq, a stage-designer turned director. There was the usual amount of cutting and hacking of the text one has come to expect in all productions nowadays and the usual quota of songs, incidental music and sound effects — all recorded and played voice-over. Recorded music in any performance is bad enough, but in the case of *El-Fahlawan* it was lethal; and rather than use the original songs El-Dweri derived from popular sources, the director roped in a song-writer who provided lyrics which, though very good in themselves, run contrary to the mood of the piece. For the title role he chose Ashraf Abdel-Ghafour, a very competent actor indeed, but in terms of age and style miscast in this role. In the second part of the performance (which starts with *Maqamah* number three) Marzouq went out of his way to play up the melodrama which made the elements of farce and open theatricality seem jarring and out of place.

El-Dweri was present the night I was there; and though he might have admired the boldness of the director in doing away with the set altogether (except for a clump of trees in one corner of the triangular El-Ghad hall in a couple of scenes), the hurly-burly atmosphere of the whole evening and the overriding zest and energy of the actors, there were moments when he must have writhed in agony and shuddered in horror. The worst of these would have been the vulgar malevolent waving of a stained piece of white cloth supposed to be smeared with the blood of Zumurruda's loss of virginity! I wonder if El-Dweri, who gave us last year a stirring production of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* and is currently working on a production of a Spanish text featuring the life of Goya, will not start reconsidering his decision not to produce his own plays.

Mohamed Enani

1939-....

'Wood' It Were So!:*

A Spy in the Sultan's Palace

Verse comedies, even of the darker hue, are extremely rare in Arabic literature. Apart from a couple of plays by Ahmed Shawqi and Aziz Abaza, I fail to find any specimens of the genre. Playwright Mohamed Enani, however, seems to favour this form. For the second time running he delves into the Mameluke period – a time of sinister plots and bloody power conflicts – coming up with a quasi-historical comedy of intrigue and mistaken identity. Years of teaching and translating Shakespeare have served the author well, lending him the skill to interweave various subplots and relate them thematically through a central poetic metaphor. It has also taught him to create a rich and varied verbal texture capable of expressing different moods, characters and social classes.

Unlike Shakespeare's comedies, however, and very much in tune with his tragedies, politics here takes centre stage. In both *The Crows* (his first verse comedy, El-Tali'a (Avant-garde) theatre, 1988) and *A Spy in the Sultan's Palace* (which opened last week at the National), an ordinary citizen – a peasant in the former and a carpenter in the latter – undertakes a trip to the palace to complain to the rulers of injustice and economic hardship. In both cases, the journey acquires a symbolic dimension and leads to the birth of consciousness in the two men.

The wheat confiscated by the sultan's soldiers in *The Crows* becomes, in *A Spy*, the wood the carpenter cannot find to practise his

* The National : 6th Feb. 1992.

trade. In the latter play, however, the plot is complicated by the threat of foreign invasion by the enemy at the frontier and the carpenter is mistaken for a disguised Tartar spy and accused of murdering the sultan to boot. In a series of situations he is alternately threatened and cajoled and his dazed incomprehension of what is happening produces a lot of hilarity besides the serious political revelations.

With great skill and artistry the author manages of transform this series of comic misunderstandings into a vehicle for a conflict between illusion and reality. The solid wood is slowly transformed into a metaphor for all that is real while the palace pales slowly into a shadowy, insubstantial vision, a "baseless fabric" of lies, delusions and hollow rhetoric.

The love interest is provided by the romantic figure of an imprisoned princess, a younger and more sympathetic version of Miss Havisham, who insists that the humble carpenter is her long-awaited knight in shining armour, complete with white horse. A more cheerful variation is her lady-in-waiting's love-affair with a sailor and a grimmer one, ending in murder, is provided by two scheming and power-hungry cousins. There is also the story of the seamstress, Om-Alia, played in a lower key, like a recurrent refrain. Spurned and betrayed in early youth by the tailor Obayd (a kind of civilian miles gloriosus who suffers from delusions of heroic feats in imaginary battles), she spends the entire play planning the wedding of an imaginary daughter and chasing after the prospective bridegroom, a young apprentice in her shop.

In all cases, whether on the streets or in the palace, and whether the major preoccupation is love or power, reality is seen as a frustrating business which drives people to seek solace in the world of the fantasy.

Indeed, flying into an imaginary world seems a common malady – a disease that has infected everybody and eaten into their souls like woodworm or dry rot. No wonder then that things as solid and tangible as wood have become a rare commodity!

Director Karam Metaweh has deftly captured this basic idea in his production and focused it in a daring visual metaphor. The illusory nature of reality is conveyed by the total and conspicuous absence of stage furniture. The throne, chairs and even the princess's *chaise-longue* are presented as wispy swings which descend from above. At various points in the play, the rulers are seen hanging in mid-air, swinging back and forth, a sign of their instability and fragile existence. In contrast to this airy, cobwebby, 'swinging' image, a solid wall in the Islamic style, featuring an old gate of Cairo, forms a back-drop to the street scenes, with a few graceful domes in the background. When the action moves to the palace, it breaks up, seemingly all by itself, into various sections, some of which disappear into the wings while others retreat to the back to make up gates and portals. At the very end of the play, this versatile wall seems to spring into life and moves in to press the actors forward, enclosing them into a claustrophobic structure. The final confrontation between illusion and reality brings it and the whole palace – the curtains, the swings, everything – crashing down in clouds of smoke. Thanks to Metaweh's conception and lighting-plan and to Sekina Mohamed Ali's design, the various locations seem to dissolve into each other, in a dreamlike manner, and the production flows smoothly without a single blackout.

Karam Metaweh's meticulous sense of form and vivid theatrical imagination were seen at their best in the three still tableaux, reminiscent

of Roberts's drawings of 19th century Cairo (made famous today by postcards), which open each act and end the play. They were also eloquently apparent in the movement design, the group formations and the distribution of light.

The acting, a well-judged mixture of the serious and the burlesque, was uniformly good, with flashes of genius here and there – especially in the case of Ashraf Abdel-Ghafour in the role of the carpenter. With great finesse and quite unostentatiously, he brought out all the comic irony of the situation without sacrificing its darker implications or tragic import. Also excelling in their respective roles were Madiha Hamdi as the delirious princess, Salwa Khattab and Midhat Mursi as the intriguing cousins, Fathiya Tantawi and Sa'id Saleh as the deranged seamstress and her errant tailor, Hamza El-Sheemi as the sultan's assassin and successor, Farouk Ita and Maha Yusef as the young amorous couple and, last but not least, Mohamed Abul-Enein's magnificent caricature, comic yet sinister, of the sultan.

It would be nitpicking I suppose, in view of the general excellence of the show, to mention that some of the costumes were drab and shabby, poorly designed or garishly-coloured. The quality of the music, however, cannot be bypassed. It was the major flaw of the production and was, to say the least, monotonous and extremely modest. But then, nothing is ever perfect.

Fawzi Fahmi

1938-....

*The Return of the Absent:**
A Historical View

Within five years of his graduation from the department of drama and theatre criticism at the Theatre Institute and prompt appointment assistant lecturer there, Fawzi Fahmi published a book entitled *The Tragic Concept and Modern Drama.* A year later, in 1968, and before the was sent to Moscow on a scholarship where he got a doctorate with a thesis on "popular theatrical forms and their relation to drama in Eastern countries," he wrote *The Return of the Absent*, his debut as playwright. In it, he was not only putting his wide knowledge of world and Egyptian drama to good use and employing it to probe theatrically the reasons behind the shattering 1967 defeat which left the nation reeling, but was also reviving an old tradition and following in the footsteps of a long line of great masters who sought inspiration in the old Greek Oedipus myth. Apart from his familiarity with the myth through his study of Greek drama, particularly Sophocles's famous treatment of it in *Oedipus Rex*, Fawzi had also read Aristotle's eulogy of it in his *Poetics*, as well as many of the most famous European adaptations of it, including Seneca's, Corneille's, Voltaire's, John Dryden's, Jean Cocteau's (*The Infernal Machine*) and Andre Gide's.

There were also precedents to the practice in Egyptian drama. In 1949, Tawfiq El-Hakim and Ali Ahmed Bakatheer published versions of the myth. Read together, the two plays reveal common features. Both view the myth from a political perspective (as their authors openly

* July 2003.

admit in their introductions to the published texts), waving aside the central conflict between Oedipus and the gods and centering the plot on a power-struggle, riddled with conspiracies. In both of them, Oedipus invariably appears as a good, benevolent king, misled, corrupted, or led astray by priests and courtiers, while Tiresias (or Luskias in Bakatheer's case) and Creon always play the villains. Significantly too, both were written in response to a national crisis.

Noting the political relevance of El-Hakim's *Odeeb* (the Arabic for Oedipus) in his book, *The Egyptian Theatre after World War II* (1979). Sami Munir relates it to its immediate historical context, reading it as a political metaphor of the events of 4 February, 1942, when the British troops surrounded King Farouk's palace and forced him to appoint a Wafdi government, with El-Nahhas Pasha at its head. Similarly, according to Munir, Tiresias (the British), in El-Hakim's play, manipulates Oedipus, the rightful heir to the throne (the Wafd party), for his own ends, bringing him to power by lies and a show of force. In both cases, the Wafd's and Oedipus's, it was a fatal mistake to get to power through the machinations of a sly enemy of the people and, therefore, both inevitably lose their power and credibility and meet with a tragic end.

Bakatheer's *Odeeb*, on the other hand, was written in the wake of the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948. "At the time," he says, "I felt despair regarding the future of the Arab nation and shame, disgrace and ignominy. Our dignity had been trampled underfoot. I remained in the grip of this deep, heavy pain a long time, not knowing how to relieve it." The play, which offers an Islamic/political reading of the myth, was obviously his way of relieving it. More than anything, it

reflects the the intensification of the Islamic movement in the late 1940's, and was obviously influenced by Sayed Qutb's book, *Social Justice in Islam*, which sought to stem the rising tide of Marxism at that time by formulating an integrated, coherent Islamic theory of social justice. Oedipus, portrayed as a kind of popular, epic hero, is an ardent believer in social justice; unfortunately, however, he is an atheist who believes only in the power of the human intellect and will. His lack of faith blinds him to the evil intrigues of Luskias, the wily, ungodly, mammon-worshipping priest and politician, and he falls an easy prey to him. Tiresias, however, who speaks like a preacher, in a language redolent of the Koran, leads him back to Allah and converts him to the belief that without faith in God and total submission to his will and guidance, social justice can never be attained. By the time Bakatheer's Oedipus leaves Thebes (and the stage), he has become a devout Moslem (like his author) who believes that only through Islam can his nation triumph and find justice and prosperity.

May be any Egyptian play based on the Oedipus myth has to be perforce political. As some Arab thinkers have argued, and El-Hakim remarked in his preface to his own treatment, the Greek concept of tragedy is inherently antithetical to the Islamic view of the relationship between human beings and God. A Moslem Oedipus can only grapple with earthly issues and fight sordid politicians and mean-spirited foes. No wonder then that Fahmi's treatment had to take a political line and present a benevolent ruler trying to save his country from a vicious web of lies spun by the evil regime. It, too, sidesteps the incest theme, presents Jocasta as a tortured woman, in the grip of remorse, and provides the hero with solace in the form of a love story with an innocent virgin who stands for the spirit of Egypt. Fahmi invested

Oedipus with real tragic depth, gave him a rebellious urge and an existential dimension which make him at the end defy the myth openly and refuse to surrender to his prescribed fate in the myth and sink in total darkness by plucking out his eyes. If the good hero (a thin disguise for Nasser) has sinned unwittingly by hiding the truth of the rampant corruption of his court from the people, trying single-handedly to put things right, he is not going to shut his eyes to it now but makes up his mind to face it, reveal it to his people and lead them on the road to salvation.

Though written in 1968, *The Return of the Absent* was not staged until years after Nasser's death. Despite its sympathetic presentation of the eponymous hero, it was perhaps deemed too critical of the regime on the whole. When two years later, in 1969, another writer, Ali Salem, attempted a similar political treatment of the myth, albeit in the vernacular, in a comical vein, and wrote his hilarious, scathing satire, *You Who Killed the Beast* (directed by Galal El-Sharqawi at [the now defunct] El-Hakim theatre), it was banned within a few nights of its opening. *The Return of the Absent* was first performed at the National in 1977, with Mahmoud Yaseen in the title role and Aida Abdel-Aziz as Jocasta under the direction of Nabil El-Alfi; and though it was a great success, the moment when it could have produced its full political impact had passed.

Encouraged by the success of *The Return of the Absent* (one is tempted to call it The Return of the Native), and hankering after the sense of immediacy and political relevance his earlier play had missed, Fahmi produced another play the following year. *The Knight and the Captive* was produced at the National in 1978, directed by Awad

Mohamed Awad, starring Nur El-Sherif, Fardous Abdel-Hamid and Faten Anwar, with highly effective sets by Samir Ahmed. Once more, Fahmi drew for inspiration on an old Greek myth, Andromache, giving it a new interpretation in the light of the current political situation. It was then the time of the peace negotiations between Egypt and Israel and the play stressed the horrors of war, the need for peace and advocated forgiveness and reconciliation. Despite the taut, classical structure, the serious theme and poetic language of the text and the high quality of the production in terms of acting and visuals, the unrelieved atmosphere of somberness proved too heavy for the audience. The mood of the times had changed; the taste for serious drama had dwindled and theatre was tending more and more towards frivolous, light entertainment. The play also came under some vicious attacks from the anti-peace, anti-normalization intellectuals and critics who opposed Sadat's peace initiative as well as his new open-door or *laisser-faire* economic policy.

Discouraged by this inimical reception and by the general intellectual atmosphere, Fahmi kept away from theatre for a number of years, pouring his creative energy into teaching, academic studies and running the Theatre Institute of which he became dean in 1982. In 1986, however, he made a glorious comeback with *The Sultan's Game*, the most theatrical, structurally ambitious and psychologically complex of his plays. Here he turned his back on Greek mythology, drawing his subject and characters from Arab history and folklore. One cannot but detect in the structure the influence of his earlier doctoral thesis on popular theatrical forms. The spatio-temporal setting is dual: the streets of present-day Cairo and the court of the Abbasid Khalif Haroun El-Rashid. The central dramatic conflict is also two-pronged: the relationship of the Khalif to his beloved sister El-Abbasa and to his

closest friend and vizier, Ja'far El-Barmaki. The conflict erupts when the sister and the friend fall in love; the Khalif's violent opposition to their marriage reveals a possessive passion on his part tinged at once with feelings of incestuous and homosexual love. As the conflict develops relentlessly on a tragic course, which ends with the murder of Ja'far, the text gradually reveals different aspects of the Khalif's contradictory nature: his sick relationship with his mother which has marred his life and ability to relate normally to women, his ruthless, childish brutality, as well as his loneliness, pervasive sense of guilt and anguished sense of loss.

On the contemporary temporal level, a family of street actors reenact in colourful sketches scenes from the history of Haroun El-Rashid in a comical vein, using popular theatrical forms, like puppets and comic interludes. But the two levels do not remain separate; not only do they replay each other in different keys, but often intersect or merge as well. They are further linked by vivid thematic echoes and, most importantly, by the fact that the street clown and his wife also double as the Khalif and his sister, El-Abbasa. This allowed Fahmi to weave a rich and varied verbal, tonal and visual theatrical texture, unparalleled in his earlier plays.

The play was masterfully directed at the National by Nabil El-Alfi and starred, once more, Nur El-Sherif and Aida Abdel-Aziz. The production was a roaring success. Why Fahmi has not written another play since is at once a mystery and a great pity. Yet, in a sense, he has not quitted drama altogether. Instead of writing drama on the face of a page or a stage, he now writes it on the face of reality. As president of the Academy of Arts and chairman of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre he is ceaselessly staging drama on a larger scale and a much larger stage.

Yusri El-Guindi

1942-....

The Tragic History of Beni Hilal:*
Al-Hilaleyah

If you have a taste for blood and thunder, for the lethal passions and deadly feuds of folk epics and sagas, you can have a gorgeous feast at the El-Salam theatre. There, the grand heroes of the *Al-Sira Al-Hilaliyah*, Abu Zeid Al-Hilali Salama, his cousin and rival Diab and his royal foe Al-Zanati Khalifa, nightly strut and fret for two hours on the stage, clashing swords and spouting one grandiloquent tirade after another. As for gore and corpses, the final scene almost surpasses the end of Hamlet.

Yursri El-Guindi, one of the few contemporary Egyptian playwrights totally committed to the dramatisation of folk culture on the stage, wrote the play in 1978, at the time when Sadat's peace initiative with Israel was tearing the Arab world apart and imposing on Egypt a terrible isolation. As usual, since his dramatic beginnings in the late 1960s, Guindi cast his eyes backwards to the past and dressed his reading of the present in the borrowed robes of popular history. He found in the chronicles of the Hilaliyah tribe, as handed down by generations of folk bards and *rababa* singers, the perfect equivalent for what was happening around him. When Samir El-Asfouri directed it at El-Tali'a the same year it created a great deal of interest, not only on account of its innovative theatrical form or its terrible prophecy of doom and gloom for the Arabs, but also because it dared prick so many time-hallowed heroic bubbles.

* 31 March 1994.

In the Sira, the story of the Hilaliyah tribe, of their migration from Najd in the Arabian Peninsula to North Africa, chased by drought, and their eventual conquest of the mighty kingdom of Al-Zanati Khalifa in Tunis, is narrated with awe and sympathy. The traditional heroic values of loyalty to the tribe, military prowess and craftiness, courage and physical strength are upheld and indiscriminately extolled. Typically, they are glorified not only in the hero, but also in his enemies and rivals. Indeed, the anonymous bards of the past who orally composed and transmitted this *Sira* could hardly suppress their excited admiration of the saga's villain Diab who was such a mighty lion on the battle field.

To the cool and critical gaze of reason, Guindi subjected this material. In his play, the folk heroes of the past are recalled to be examined, tried, and eventually condemned by a modern chorus of ordinary people. As the old massacres, betrayals, passions and bloody deeds are re-enacted and scrutinised in the present, the heroic interpretation collapses and the myth is shattered. Abu Zeid is revealed as a ruthless idealist who, in the pursuit of his romantic dream of an earthly paradise, leads his people to disaster. The cynical realism of Diab, on the other hand, and his deep-seated contempt for human nature and sardonic denigration of all ideals (save that of self-promotion) are not without justification and are ultimately more honest than Abu Zeid's loudly declaimed selflessness. In the final analysis, the romantic idealist proves no less selfish than the cynic, only more blind. The references to Nasser and Sadat are unmistakable.

To further underline the conflict between the chorus's perspective and that of the heroes and focus it on the formal level, director Abdel-Rahman El-Shafi'i (one of the pioneers and champions of the

folk heritage) decided to place some of the last surviving *Sira* singers on the stage, side by side with the chorus, throughout the performance. The result was an exciting double exposure of the events, forming two contrasting points of view almost simultaneously.

Between them, the actors and singers kept the stage in a constant state of hustle and bustle, creating a vivid and rich medley of sights and sounds. And stage-designer Mahira Darraz was very wise to keep her set and props to the bare minimum: two rows of wooden blocks for seating the singers and the chorus flanked a white circle in the centre which sloped upward to connect with two slightly raised levels; the sides of the wide avant-scene (or fore-stage) were covered with motifs of horses (made of cardboard), some shawls, turbans, spears and sabres to serve as props for the actors. At the back, two thrones of different styles stood on either side, one enclosed by a number of iron chains dangling from the flies, the other by a wide rope-net. Of blood, however, there was plenty, splashed and splodged all over the beige-coloured drapes that framed the stage.

For the roles of Abu Zeid, Diab, and Al-Zanati, director El-Shafi'i enlisted veteran classical actor Hamdi Gheith and two of his disciples: Khalil Muris and Ramzi Gheith. All were in admirable classical form and ranted in style. Nevertheless, they managed to invest their respective roles with a measure of pathos and credible humanity. In contrast, the chorus of modern commentators — Samir Wahid, Lamia El-Amir, Salah Hifni and Magdi Mahgoub — were pure fun, despite their serious role, and bubbled with humour and energy. But without the magnificent Sayed El-Dawi and his singers, the masks of tragedy and comedy would have remained irreconcilably apart.

A Witch Minus the Broom:*

The Witch

Yusri El-Gindi's *Al-Sahera* (The Witch) took a long time arriving at the National, growing in the process from a slim one-act play into a ponderous three-hour performance. It was six months in rehearsal, with occasional mishaps and forced break-offs; ominously, one week before the scheduled opening, its director Mohsen Hilmi had a bad fall and had to limp through the final days with the help of a crutch. The dress rehearsal was a cheerless, disheartening experience, and weeks later, the play has not improved.

I had looked forward to Samiha Ayoub's invigorating theatrical presence and expected from El-Gindi the kind of passionate writing and fresh insights that inform his best work. Besides, the presence of Mohsen Hilmi – a director famous for his colourful, vigorous style – as head of the production team had also augured well. It was his debut at the National and one did not doubt that he would seize the opportunity to shake up this old respectable establishment and shame it out of its habitual smug stolidity. The boisterous fairground atmosphere of his *chef- d'oeuvre, El-Mehabazatiyyah (Street Performers)*, was too much to hope for; but something of its zestful earthiness, galloping rhythm and imaginative visual liveliness was definitely expected.

What happened, in fact, was a cacophonous clash of styles. While El-Gindi's dramatically undernourished and verbally overblown and grandiloquent text chased after grandiose effects, Hilmi seemed

* 11 January 1996.

desperately determined to undercut its bombastic declamations and prick its rhetorical bubbles. Ironically, the play's spuriously complex double-plot schema, with two different spatio-temporal levels and sets of characters, helped to exacerbate this sense of a conflict of artistic directions. The performance creaked along laboriously, mercilessly jolting the audience from scene to scene and from one level to the other until one felt one was watching two unrelated plays – and flat, dull ones at that. Not even Ayoub's bewitching art and mesmerizing presence could heal the fissure or seal the cracks. And this is saying a lot.

In any part, Ayoub is always a pleasure to watch; her overpowering personality and stirring voice rarely fail to rouse the audience whatever the play. I have seen her breathe life into some of the dullest imaginable lines and endow some dismally shallow texts with imaginary depths. *The Witch*, however, beat her. She put up a valiant fight, but she did not even have the bare rudiments of a part to work with. The original short version of the play, entitled *The Rape of Galila* (read the rape of Egypt), is illuminating in this respect. In it, the eponymous holy Galila – abusively nicknamed the witch by the corrupt authorities though venerated by the poor and downtrodden – remains tantalizingly absent throughout. Only in the final scene does she appear – an ethereal figure in a bridal gown – to carry the soul of her slain hero and defender up to heaven. Obviously, this short, unpretentious political parable, with its typical popular hero, simple confrontations and vague, historical setting, was neither fit for the National nor for a formidable star like Ayoub. It had to be retailored to new measurements and when the material, however stretched, proved insufficient, the author resorted to patching.

In the new version, Galila, though still safely out of sight, is provided with an all too tangible, vociferous Doppelganger in the figure of an all-seeing, interminably preaching good witch. As commentator-cum-narrator, she keeps intruding on the few events of the flimsy story, telling us what we have already seen, padding it up with rhyming fusty slogans and bombastic orations. Soon enough, her presence becomes not only positively boring, but also, since the audience are neither deaf, blind nor dim, deeply offensive. Still, rather than weary the audience into submission, the witch's unrelenting verbal avalanche alerts them to its underlying dangerous bigotry. Like the typical fanatic, her political creed is equated with absolute moral right and any opposition to it with diabolical malevolence. Indeed, the confusion of politics and religion in this play is deeply disturbing and so is the progress of its folk hero from rebellion and lawlessness to *Jihad* or holy war then martyrdom. One wonders if El-Gindi, an enlightened progressive intellectual, has unwittingly come under the influence of the arguments of the political Islamists. The confusion was perceptible in the first version where twice the honourable bandit kneels in front of Galila's lighted lattice window and worships, as if facing a holy shrine. In the second, it became quite pronounced, thanks to the loquacious witch.

To pad *The Rape of Galila* still further and make it look structurally elaborate, El-Gindi tacked on a parallel plot, set in modern times, about a destitute citizen who is robbed of his lawful inheritance by the government and reduced to dwelling in the tomb of his aristocratic ancestors. The arrival of an eviction order at the hands of a small bureaucrat unleashes his tongue (not that he had been silent before) and we are treated to a full account of his misfortunes and sorrows

punctuated with sentimental songs. At the end of it, the poor bureaucrat suddenly drops dead and we are told that the "truth" killed him. More likely, it was boredom that did it.

The two stories, which are given mostly through narration, are arranged in alternating scenes to create a false impression of complexity and variety. But neither the alternation nor the plethora of witty songs and elaborate dances (roped in by the director) could do any thing to alleviate the boredom or dispel the vexing feeling that one was being cheated.

It nearly broke my heart to listen to the great Ayoub ranting redundant banalities, to watch a consummate comedian like Osama Abbas limply repeating the same story over and over again and in the same ungainly, spiritless language, to see some of the best actors of the National reduced to extras or to rigid mechanical puppets and, worst of all, to note El-Gindi's unflinching, laborious striving after symbolism at every step. What a lot of good, expensive talent was wasted in that show.

Farouq Gweida

1945-....

The Ruins of a Dream:*

Khedive Ismail

After much protracted wrangling and many delays, the historical figure of Khedive Ismail has made his way to the boards and into the limelight in a new verse play by poet and playwright Farouk Guweida.

The journey to the stage, however, was not strewn with roses. The year-long row which prologued the public exposure of this text in performance was a drama in its own right; it involved the minister of culture, the head of the state-theatre sector, the manager of the National theatre, the director of the Opera house, many writers and journalists and, of course, the author. Finally, it took the diplomatic energies of Osama El-Baz — one of the president's political advisors no less — to bring about a reconciliation: a change of venue from the National to the Balloon provided a face-saving excuse to bow out of the battling arena; the play was whisked to the Balloon and put under the protection of Abdel-Ghaffar Ouda, the head of the folk, music and dance sector who stood firmly behind it, allotted to it a generous budget, and all in all acted like a benevolent fairy godmother or *deus ex machina*, providing a happy ending to the bitter hostilities.

Vexingly, the whys and wherefores of this long-drawn-out dispute remain a closely guarded secret, and now that the parties are reconciled none of them are likely to start blabbing. Rumour has it, however, that the author's virulent press campaign against the policies of the Ministry of Culture (he edits a weekly cultural page in the daily *Al-Ahram*) sparked it off, and that some hangers-on on both sides fuelled it to pay

* 16 December 1993.

off old scores. But whatever the reasons, at the play's opening there they were, yesterday's foes darting flashy smiles at each other, wringing each other's hands and exchanging the occasional bone-crushing hug.

But unfortunate as the circumstances which surrounded the production of *The Khedive* may be, they seem somehow curiously appropriate: Khediv Isma'il was the centre of heated controversy during his life and long after his death. So, why not in the theatre? The bad luck which bedevilled the last years of his reign before his forced exit from power in 1878 seem to have affected the production of Guweida's text. In performance, however, it bears pretty few marks of its difficult and prolonged birth.

Still *The Khedive* and its author deserved better treatment and the prestige of the National if only by dint of its being a serious verse drama. In a country where poetry on the stage is something of a rarity and the number of verse dramas, at a rough estimate, accounts for less than one per cent of the total dramatic output to date (a curious fact in view of the long poetic heritage of the Arabic tongue) one would expect a play by a popular poet like Guweida to receive the warm support of the state-funded theatre. But apart from the medium, how can anyone seek to suppress or shelve the first fair-minded dramatic attempt at a reappraisal of the much-maligned and often caricatured Khedive Ismail — a man not infrequently or unjustifiably dubbed by historians as the builder of modern Egypt?

After 1952, history was adulterated and stretches of it obliterated to serve the purpose of the new regime; the message went that all was darkness until the revolution said "let there be light." At school, I

remember, the history text books had a picture of the khedive looking like a comic-strip cartoon, with all the faults of a weak and lascivious monarch and not one saving grace; with a huge paunch and a red tarboush perched on his head, he found nothing better to do than chase after every bit of skirt and squander the nation's assets; and when these ran out, he borowed from right and left until the country was crippled with debt and finally declared bankrupt. As a punishment for his wickedness, he was sent tumbling from the throne like poor Humpty Dumpty in the nursery rhyme.

Guweida however, unlike "all the king's soldiers and all the king's men" has put the historical Humpty back together again. The image of Ismail that greets us in his play maintains many links with the traditional cartoon: of his weakness, ruthless egotism, inordinate vanity, foolish extravagance and self-indulgence we are given ample proof, especially in the first part of the play; but even in this part, as the scenes build up towards the climax (Ismail's shooting of his life-long pal and prime minister Siddiq), we become progressively aware of another, more positive, impulsive and generous lover, we perceive a patron of the arts, with a highly-developed aesthetic sense. In his willingness to let himself be easily led by his friends and associates we glimpse a trusting nature and a child-like credulousness. He is only cruel when thwarted, never intentionally or sadistically, and even his vanity and pig-headedness have a boyish charm about them and are completely free of malice.

Spoilt, immature and naively optimistic, Guweida's Ismail certainly is. But it is not here that we shall find the seeds of his tragic "great fall." Nor can we find them in his extravagance per se — which is readily trotted out in many books as an explanation for the huge national debts

he incurred. It is quite possible that some of the money was used to indulge the Khedive's expensive tastes in everything, including women. After all, not every man can afford an Empress Eugenie as mistress. The bulk of the loans, however, went in another direction, invested in the fulfillment of a dream: to make the Egypt he inherited into a modern state on a European model, to recreate Cairo in the image of Paris, and to infuse into the Egyptian way of life the grace, elegance and sophistication of Parisian life. Not a bad dream.

The investment yielded dividends in the form of an impressive industrial, agricultural and educational infrastructure. The dividends also included the first government in modern Egyptian history with a council of ministers and various portfolios, the setting up of a bank-based economy, the introduction of girls education, the replanning of Cairo, not to mention his patronage of the arts, the frequent invitation of foreign theatre troupes, and the building of Cairo's Opera house, which in 1871 hosted the belated premiere of Verdi's *Aida* which had been especially commissioned for its opening the year before.

Ironically, it was those dreams and glorious achievements that lured him deeper into the treacherous waters of foreign loans. Ismail meant well but lacked the political acumen that could have helped him navigate his way to safety; he trusted foreign friends far too much.

It is this aspect of Khedive Ismail as an insatiable dreamer that Guweida fastens onto in order to explain his fall and infuse it with the grandeur of tragedy. If Ismail falls in the end it is not precisely for any particular deed he has done; it is simply that his head became too swollen with dreams and too heavy for his shoulders to support.

In performance, the role of Ismail went to Mahmoud Yaseen, who bears no physical resemblance to the real khedive. In another play this could be a disadvantage; here it positively helped to free the character from the familiar cliches associated with it and left Yaseen free to flesh out in many telling details the author's new interpretation. His performance made us feel as if we were looking inside rather than at the khedive. He painted physically, with his movement, voice, calculated gestures and mercurial facial expressions, a vivid landscape of Ismail's mind. He slid easily from one mood to the next, frequently ruffling the regular metrical flow of the verse to create new rhythms suited to the particular dramatic moment. He gave a magnificent performance worthy of the great actor that he is. If one thing marred it, it was the frequent intrusion of song and dance.

Samiha Ayoub's performance as So'ad, Ismail's spurned old mistress and the nagging voice of his conscience, suffered even more from such intrusions. The damage became quite serious when two of the most crucial monologues were replaced by two recorded songs in her voice. Ayoub is a great actress with decades of experience, but she is no singer. In his attempt to transform the play into a musical to accord with the denomination of the venue — the folk, music and dance sector — director Galal El-Sharqawi made many sad and incomprehensible mistakes, like forgetting that Nevine Allouba is primarily a singer and giving her an acting part as Eugenie with only one puny song. While Allouba made the best of a lousy job, Ayoub, like a miracle worker, managed to breathe some life into a mangled part. Her strong voice, regal posture and unfailing charisma, though grim-faced on this occasion, carried her through.

The rest of the cast, particularly the trio of Ismail's associates — Osman (Medhat Mursi), Siddiq (Ashraf Abdel-Ghaffour) and de Lesseps (Farouq El-Dimirdash) — were blithe, serious or villainous as the occasion demanded. Their roles were blissfully free of singing, as was that of Abeer El-Sharqawi.

But of dancing — even though choreographed by Walid Aouni to the music of Mohamed El-Mougi and elegantly performed by female Russian dancers contracted especially for the show, plus some sprightly male dancers — there was far too much. Indeed, *The Khedive* is a prime example of how a play which upholds the primacy of acting and of language can get swamped by visual much ado. This feeling of clutter also extended to the sets, designed by Mahmoud Mabrouk: whether lush and ornate or geometrically austere, they were invariably bulky and overpowering. The enormous stage of the Balloon Theatre may explain such elaborate and bulky decor, but it cannot excuse it.

I cannot help feeling that a more orthodox approach to the play would have served it better and helped to knit it more closely and tie up some loose ends. El-Sharqawi's method of production, on the other hand, underscored the heightened musicality of the verse and its lyricism at the expense of the drama and deepened the central crack in the structure of the play. One felt as if one was watching two plays simultaneously: a tragic character drama about a real historical figure and a political musical comedy satirising the present with the help of masks, acrobats, dancers and clowns. Still, the audience love Guweida's simple, accessible verse and its mellifluous trills and frills; they seem to love the dancers too and the eloborate spectacle which is why they flock nightly to the Balloon.

Osama Anwar Okasha

1941 - ....

A Long Night's Journey Into Light:*

The People on the Third Floor

I visited the National on three different nights this week and every time I was strongly reminded of the 1960s. It was not only the charismatic presence of Samiha Ayyoub at the head of the star-studded cast of *The People on the Third Floor*, the sight of all those people crowding into the theatre to fill the auditorium, balcony and boxes, even on the notoriously 'dead' nights much dreaded by actors, or that most of the audience were drawn to the play as much by the name of its author as by the cast (a rare phenomenon nowadays, though quite common in the golden 1960s); it was also something about the quality of attention the audience gave to the stage: a mixture of excited expectation, intent concentration, and intense involvement. This can be partly explained by the huge popularity of Osama Anwar Okasha's television serials which have made him a star in his own right; but, mostly, it is due to the daring political outspokenness of the text which caused it to be banned for nine years, its clever detective-story formula which keeps the audience tingling with suspense and treats them to one sensational revelation after another, and its taut structure which strictly adheres to the classical unities, compressing the action in one night and one place.

Like J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, of which I was strongly reminded, the action in Okasha's play begins with the arrival of an unexpected visitor during a family celebration; and just as Priestley's enigmatic Inspector Goole interrupts the engagement party of the

* 10 May 2001.

daughter of the wealthy Birling family on the pretext of investigating a suicide, Okasha's police officer barges into the flat of a middle class family of modest means, disrupting and completely messing up the wedding night of the eldest son, Sa'id (Abdel-Aziz Makhyoun), on the pretext of inspecting the flat for security reasons. It is a necessary routine measure, he explains, since the flat overlooks Ramses square where a presidential motorcade in honour of some foreign head of state is due to pass the following morning.

But rather than a routine inspection, this unexpected night call rapidly develops into a form of arbitrary, vicious prying into the secrets of the family and the souls and innermost thoughts of its members. Through probing, relentless questioning and gruelling mental and physical pressure, the police inspector (Riyad El-Kholi) drags out all the skeletons in the cupboard and forces the family to face them. His purpose in all this, however, is neither to heal nor reconcile, but rather to humiliate and mortify. Indeed, the inspector here seems to know everything not just about this family, but about all the citizens of the country. The investigation seems no more than a charade designed to tear the family apart, destroy its members' self-respect and trust in each other and crush their human dignity so that they may be easily coerced into falsely confessing to harbouring a terrorist in their midst. Such a confession would earn the officer promotion and perhaps a medal and for this he is willing to go to any lengths.

The damage caused by this harrowing invasion of privacy is thorough and irreparable. The family emerges from its ordeal tainted and battered; the mother, Wedad (Samiha Ayoub) and the father's closest friend, Moheeb (Rashwan Tawfiq), who moved in with the family after the father's death, are suspected of carrying on a secret love

affair; the eldest son, Sa'id (Abdel-Aziz Makhyoun), once a revolutioanry, has finally succumbed to financial pressures and accepted to marry the cast-off mistress of his boss in exchange for a lucrative position; and the middle son, Wahid (Farouk El-Fishawi), is an unconscionable crook who swindles his sister and her fiancé, among others, out of their savings and cares about no one but himself. And even the innocent are not without some blemish or cause for private shame. The youngest son Hani (Sayed Shafiq) is a cripple, confined to a wheelchair; the daughter, Rabab (Afaf Hamdi) is an unprepossessing spinster, and the stepsister, Wasilah (Nirmene Kamal), the dead father's daughter by a secret marriage, is kept in the dark about her parentage and employed as a servant by the family.

Contrary to the inspector's expectations, however, the violent confrontations he triggers and the secrets he unearths, though shattering, have a cathartic effect and help the family to stand up to him and oppose his tyranny. They may be weak, cowardly, and selfish, or foolish, ignorant or helpless, but they can still say no. In a long, passionate tirade at the end, Samiha Ayoub roundly declares that "people are stronger than bullets." And it is by no means the only loud slogan shouted from the stage; in fact, the play is liberally spiced with such slogans which are evenly shared out among the main characters. Though some of them are exhilaratingly bold and deliciously venomous, affording much vicarious satisfaction, they tend to pall after a while and give the play as a whole a garish tone. The marked absence of anything approaching subtlety, coupled with a tendency for melodramatic declamation and sentimental effusions deprived the text of any deep, reflective quality and made it sound in places embarrassingly banal.

I do not know if Okasha cared to revise his text after so many years before submitting it to the National; but as I saw it, it definitely needed some rewriting, if only to smooth out the crudities of the plot and awkward contradictions in the dialogue. As it stands, one cannot help feeling quite dazed by the number and sheer speed of the incredible discoveries sprung upon one in the last half hour without warning, or hope to make sense of the sudden and startling changes in character the mother rapidly displays in the final scenes. Such slips are incredible in a work by a proficient craftsman like Okasha, and I strongly suspect that he added new scenes to build up the mother's part when Ayoub was cast for it; it seems the only plausible explanation, and however disconcerting the result, it at least allowed us to enjoy the presence of Ayyoub on stage longer than would have been the case otherwise, which is more than sufficient compensation.

It was a real treat watching Ayoub on stage once more and feeling the full force of her energy flowing into the auditorium; and if Okasha had done nothing but persuade Ayoub to come back to the stage, it would have been enough. But his fame and popularity were also instrumental in bringing together such popular film and television stars as El-Fishawi, El-Kholi, Tawfiq, and Makhyoun, and in their glowing presence, the relatively new or unknown actors, Shafiq, Hamdi and Kamal, could not but shine.

Amazingly, Okasha and Huda Wasfi, the National's artistic director, took the risk of entrusting the production to a young and inexperienced director; and how they managed to convince the stars to work with him is quite a feat and tantalizing mystery. But Mohamed Omar, whom Wasfi had tried out in a small production at the National

six months ago, acquitted himself better than one would have expected. His movement and lighting designs were effective without being obtrusive, and, together with stage-designer Fadi Foukeih, he created a setting at once realistic, functional and potently symbolic, visually suggesting a state of siege. In one detail, however (the head of the statue of Ramses which peeped over the sill of the backstage window, with part of the railway station building behind it), the set was ludicrously belaboured, naïve and over-emphatic. It was one more loud slogan, as if we did not already have more than enough. But whatever the flaws of this production, or may be because of them, *The People on the Third Floor* has a distinct 1960s flavour; it gives it a strange nostalgic appeal and enough popular ingredients to ensure its continued success with the public.

A Ghost Sonata:*

At High Noon

After *The People on the Third Floor* (staged at the National in 2001), Osama Anwar Okasha's *At High Noon* (currently at the same venue, with Mohamed Omar once more directing and veteran actress Samiha Ayyoub in the lead) feels like a studied variation on the previous work or, indeed, the second part of a planned trilogy – very much in the style of the author's famous television drama serials – about contemporary Egyptian reality and its historical antecedents. Similar in structure and overall theme, with more or less the same panoply of disillusioned, middle-aged and young but frustrated characters, it offers a composite picture of family relationships at the middle class social strata and unfolds like a grim tale of moral corruption, failed hopes, wasted potential and self-deception.

As in the previous play, after a relaxed, realistic beginning, shot through with plenty of non-too-original comedy, which introduces the setting and characters, a sudden, unforeseen event jolts the characters, audience and whole play onto an unexpected symbolic plane. In *The People on the Third Floor*, it was the arrival of a police inspector – hugely reminiscent of J.B. Priestley's real/imaginary inspector Goole in *An Inspector Calls* – at the flat of a middle-class family of strained means during the wedding of its eldest son. Here, it is the engimatic, wholesale drowning of five young people at a sea resort which is followed by many more reports of similar incidents all over Alexandria. The investigation of this tragic affair leads to harrowing, melodramatic

* 28 May 2003.

revelations about the secret lives and relationships of the victims' respective families and about the 1960s' generation in general.

As the revelations accumulate, generating a lot of suspense, and the drowning incident itself as a fact becomes a moot point, shrouded in a thick cloud of suspicion, the thin crust of naturalism begins to crack, gradually exposing the author's intent and the true nature of the play as a social-political parable. First, as reports of more young people drowning everywhere keep coming in, we are treated to mysterious mobile calls from the absentees which could be factual or easily the result of wishful thinking on the part of their distraught families. You would imagine that the sight of the supposedly drowned young five suddenly materializing as if out of the blue, in bathing suits, singing and joking, with towels gaily flung over their shoulders, would put an end to the mystery. But no such hope: just as the parents heave a sigh of relief and prepare to resume their former lives, the police inspector, who has throughout denied the truth of the drowning reports and suspected a conspiracy to ruin his career, walks in declaring that the bodies of the drowned young people have been thrown up on the shore. Who then are the people who came back? Did they really come back, or is it another collective hallucination?

Up until the final curtain, the riddle remains unsolved. But this is only on the realistic level. On the parabolic, no member of the audience is left in doubt as to the meaning of what they have seen. In the dialogue, over and over to a reprehensible extent, the play has made its point. Egypt, symbolized by the network of dilapidated summer chalets owned and run by *Hajjah* Zeinat (Samiha Ayoub), a former prostitute and owner of many brothels turned pious business woman, has

become, like the beautiful house in Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*, a place grown "old, mouldy and rotten ... where people torment each other and go crazy." Like the proverbial cat who eats her young thinking it is for their own good, or the rapacious cook in Strindberg's masterpiece, that "bloated monster" who sucks up the life of everything she touches, *Hajjah* Zeinat herself, though a victim of society and equally sinned against as sinning, seems to destroy the lives of everyone around her.

Actresses Eva, Magda El-Khateeb and Salwa Khattab – all television stars – offer variations on the same character and, in every case, the victims are the sons and daughters. Dalia Mustafa, the spokeswoman of the younger generation, ruthlessly condemns all and, like Strindberg's "Young Woman" who lives in the shadow of "The Mummy" in the closet, has lost all desire to live and is withering away "because of the air in this house which reeks of crime, deception and lies of every kind." With the exception of the caretaker, his wife and the bigamous, philandering Kharboush (farcically rendered by Yusef Dawood), all the characters tell us in turn, at different points, what we have already discovered for ourselves – that they are lifeless ghosts with thick masks to camouflage the void behind them, and empty husks incapable of love or real communication.

"If you keep silent too long, things begin to rot. Stagnant, stinking pools begin to form," says "The Student" in Strindberg's *Sonata.* This is what happens in Okasha's bleak new play. The world it depicts is glitzy on the outside, rotten underneath. No "action" is possible here and we do not get any. Except for the doubtful drowning incident, nothing happens and nothing is capable of happening. Whatever lives

the characters once had, had ended long before the curtains open and the only dramatic action possible must take the form of revelation through dialogue or confessional monologues. In this respect, *At High Noon*, not unlike many other modern plays, reflects its overriding themes of loss, impotence, lack of drive and isolation in its structure, using the mystery formula to maintain the interest of the audience and propel the series of discoveries.

In this kind of play, especially if it runs into three hours, verbosity is always a concomitant danger and *At High Noon*, despite Okasha's expert craftsmanship, could have done with a bit of cutting and condensation. This would have possibly softened its irritating preachy tone and curbed its heavy-fisted didactic tendency. Above all, what one misses here is subtlety and fineness of touch; and, as if to make matters worse, the director bracketed the show with rousing lyrics (by Bahaa Jaheen) which splet out Okasha's message in no uncertain terms and sought, with the help of Atteya Mahmoud's music and choral singing to bludgeon the audience into accepting it even before the play started.

Ideally, *At High Noon* should have taken the form of a chamber play on the model of Strindberg's Sonata which it closely resembles at the core. Okasha, however, seems to have had the National in mind and an audience who would come expecting a full-length play and the kind of stuff he churns out for television with all the attendant thrills. But whatever the reason, *At High Noon* seemed to me like a play split down the middle – a potential *Ghost Sonata* trapped in the 1960s' tradition of social comedy, weighted down by the cliches of realism and fettered by the formula for commercial success, with its ostentatious, calculated effects, bravura roles and speeches, solo numbers for stars

and cues for applause. This explains the uneven style of the acting and its sudden, startling shifts from broad comedy to naturalism to declamatory melodrama. It also explains the non-too-successful combination of realism and expressionism in Ayman Nur's sets. Osama's popularity, however, together with the star-studded cast seemed to sweep aside the faults of the text and direction. The audience looked happy and clapped uproariously the night I was there and from the critics the play has had nothing short of rave reviews since it opened.

Lenin El-Ramli

1946-....

Blind Man's Bluff:*

Point of View

Few were surprised when *Point of View* (into its third season at the New Opera theatre) was voted by critics Best Production of 1990; the Actor's Studio Ensemble is one of the most prestigious private theatre companies in Egypt, with a distinguished record of productions. Founded in 1980 by actor/director Mohamed Subhi and playwright Lenin El-Ramli (the only respectable Egyptian dramatist yet to make a living out of writing for the stage), the company has since put up a heroic fight to survive on its own artistic terms. So far it has succeeded – a remarkable feat considering the tidal wave of inflation that has sunk many a theatrical venture, pushing some to the brink of bankruptcy while forcing formerly respectable companies to make shameful concessions to sleazy oil-battened tastes.

The Studio's struggle to keep afloat without dumping its integrity is made harder by governmental harassment in the from of exorbitant taxes (a scandalous third of the box-office returns) and the newly introduced censoring fees! Imagine paying for your work to be censored and possibly banned! The Studio's founders, however, stood their ground and dug in their heels, at one point going to the expense of giving renegade companies, private and state-sponsored alike, a figurative slap in the face with an impressive production of *Hamlet* no less!

---

* 28 March 1991.

Like most of the Studio's productions, however, *Point of View* is a comedy with a serious import. We are in a charity home for the blind run by an unscrupulous gang. The gang – fat manager, sexy blonde secretary and puny male nurse – not only regularly plunder the charity funds, leaving the inmates in disgraceful conditions, but also practise upon them the meanest forms of deception. To keep their blind charges from rebelling, they feed them illusions and false reports about their physical surroundings. This results in heart-rending and side-splitting confusion as the inmates' mental images about their world constantly clash with the evidence of their remaining senses, and the evidence of our own eyes.

With the arrival of a new inmate, however, the fiction threatens to crack up. The newcomer, Abul-Uyoon (in Arabic "the man with many eyes"), sets himself the task of calling the gang's bluff. Gradually he unmasks the miserable reality of life in the home and the unconscionable practices of its staff, falling in love with a near-blind inmate in the process. The gang, meanwhile, are rattled by his mysterious Tiresian powers. True to his name, he seemingly possesses many eyes, some at the back of his head, some even with X-rays! They suspect him of shamming and put him through a series of tests, the bluffing and counter-bluffing turning the play into an exciting battle of wits.

There is also the teasing mystery of Abul-Uyoon himself, keeping us guessing to the end whether he is really blind. The play seems to be saying yes and no alternately, and sometimes in the same breath; and since playwright Lenin El-Ramli keeps this card up his sleeve for as long as he can, I shall not spoil the game.

What is important, though, is that as evidence and counter-evidence pile up, we experience something of the same confusion and sense of unreality which afflicts the bewildered inmates of the home. Suddenly we realise that the author is calling our bluff, challenging our claim to sight, to being different from the deluded tormentors and tormented inhabiting the home. By keeping the truth about Abul-Uyoon a well-guarded secret till near the end, El-Ramli deftly drags us unawares into the world of the blind, transforming the "home" into an ironic metaphor of the homeland!

Where Arabs Fear to Tread:*

In Plain Arabic

For the past three years, the Mohamed Sobhi and Lenin El-Ramli duo have been dealing the state-run theatre one severe blow after another. This year, they have achieved a clean knock-out and roundly confuted the official view that only the state theatre is capable of producing 'serious' art and that private companies can only produce cheap entertainment.

For nearly a decade, members of the Actor's Studio have clung tenaciously to their arduous creed of integrity and independence: they would neither succumb to financial pressure and work within the state's bureaucratic framework, which has proved the burial-ground for many a theatrical talent, nor would they subscribe to the short-sighted, callow, commercial policies of the bastard, hit-and-run private show-biz enterprises.

Their perseverance has finally paid off, in moral and material terms. For two successive years, their *Point of View* has been voted by the national and opposition press as best production of the year and brought them critical acclaim and decent financial returns. Not only has the company kept well afloat, it has also felt sufficiently sure of its ground to embark on a new venture: a young actors' studio was launched six months ago with a new play and fresh talents.

* 9 January 1992.

The new recruits, who number 50, are predominantly graduates with some experience in fringe troupes or university theatre. Some have received formal training at the Theatre Institute or the American University, but this did not exempt them from the intensive, special training course conducted by the indefatigable Sobhi. The result was a new crop of versatile actors with a wide range of technical, vocal and physical skills and El-Ramli's new play was designed to accommodate as many as 20 of them in major parts. When everything was nice and ready and in top form, the ever-green *Point of View* was moved to the company's new second home, El-Fardoos theatre, leaving its place at the New Opera theatre to the young actors to make their debut in another El-Ramli-Sobhi hit.

In Plain Arabic proved an instant success; not only were the critics loud and unanimous in its praise, but in an end-of-the-year opinion poll conducted by *Al-Ahram's* research centre, it came second only to *Point of View* as best play of the year. To top it all, the production brought the company an unexpected windfall and more laurels when it was nominated for the So'ad El-Sabah $15,000 annual award for creative and intellectual merit.

Intellectually, the play continues the same daring questioning of Arab culture and its underlining principles and attitudes which El-Ramli started three years ago in *Ahlan Ya Bakawat* (Welcome, Gentlemen), one of his rare forays into the National theatre and one of the National's rare hits. The scene here is London where a group of students from as many as 15 Arab countries are viewed through the eyes of an Egyptian television crew doing a programme on Arabs in London. The rich

tapestry of characters also includes three British males and two females, the best ever presented on the Egyptian stage; indeed, El-Ramli's exceptional flair for characterisation has never been put to better use.

The plot involves an assault on a Palestinian student by some British hooligans, followed by his symbolic disappearance; an ominous visit by the students to a night club which ends in a mugging; the burning of a bookshop; mysterious calls from kidnappers demanding a fat ransom; the sudden arrival of the Palestinian's fiancée; a project for a play and another for a debate; four love stories, two major and two marginal, besides some casual sex which, predictably, leads to the danger of a wholesale AIDS infection! And if that sounds too dizzying, wait until you have seen the play.

Out of this incredible jumble of incidents and characters, El-Ramli wove an intricate pattern, too complex for words. He held the threads firmly within a coherent conception and however knotted they became through the multiple, simultaneous interactions and collisions he deftly extricated them. What was on trial here was not the West, in the figure of Britain, although it came in for a large slice of criticism; what was on trial here, in very plain and almost too cruel words, was the Arab mind. Not a single bubble was left unburst; all our protective inherited assumptions, verbal blankets and rhetorical shields were rudely stripped one by one and Sobhi's vocal and visual interpretation of the text was not more merciful. An area of ruthless self-confrontation was revealed here with terrible honesty; and despite the humour and the vitality, *In Plain Arabic* remains a place where Arabs should fear to tread.

Nevertheless, on the 9th of this month, an unprecedented event of deep artistic and political significance will take place. Sobhi and El-Ramli will invade the state-run Opera to receive, on behalf of their private theatre company, a top Arab award for intellectual distinction. And who should play the role of ministering angel but our minister of culture! What a triumph for the Actor's Studio! And what a bitter pill to swallow for the state theatre! One more point to score for our fledgeling democracy.

Arabian Nightmares:*

The Nightmare

One of the most disconcerting, most dismaying items of news I have received since coming home after months of enforced travelling abroad has been the splitting up of the long Sobhi-El-Ramli partnership and the dismantling of their joint theatrical venture, Studio 80. The reasons behind this sudden rupture are as yet a mystery. And when one remembers the many laurels that were heaped upon them over the past three years on account of their two smash-hits *Point of View* and *In Plain Arabic*, the mystery grows even darker. Some speak of financial disputes, others of differences of views over the future policy of the company; a third group invokes the figure of the "green-eyed monster" jealousy by way of explanation, and a fourth lays the whole blame at the door of the proverbial "evil eye".

But, whatever the reasons, the sad fact remains that Studio 80 is no longer in operation. The New Opera theatre, the rented home of the company for many years, is dark and deserted; Mohamed Sobhi has thrown his artistic lot for the time being with a commercial company of dubious repute (which, characteristically, sports the pretentious name Oscar), and has come up with a show called *Ala Balata*, currently playing at Qasr El-Nil Theatre. Ironically, the title of the play (which means in Arabic *Plain Speaking* or *No Frills*) evokes vividly the title of the last play he produced for Studies 80: El-Ramli's famous *In Plain Arabic*. El-Ramli, on the other hand, has withdrawn with the

* 23 September 1993.

company's recent recruits of young men and women (the budding stars of *Plain Arabic*) to a decent, medium-size theatre, slightly off the beaten track for theatre-goers. The theatre, formerly a cinema, lies off the Salah Salim autostrade, near Darrasah, and bears the auspicious name El-Fardoos, meaning paradise.

In this little, secluded paradise, El-Ramli continues his fight against the rampant commercialism of the Cairene theatre, and despite the many financial problems he currently faces, his faith shows no signs of flagging. It is no doubt partly nourished and bolstered by the energy, dedication and ardent enthusiasm of the many young talents he has adopted; but it also owes something to the critical accolade his *In Plain Arabic* has received and the unprecedented publicity it has achieved. Only recently, El-Ramli has received an official invitation to take this play to Tunisia to represent Egypt at the Carthage Festival next month — an honour not extended to any state-funded company.

It was not to see *In Plain Arabic*, however, that I went to El-Fardoos, but to watch the matinee show which El-Ramli has openly christened *The Nightmare*. What an off-putting title for a private-sector play! Sitting at one of the many white tables dotting the cheerful open-air cafeteria in front of the theatre and enjoying the chatter of the many young people around, I could not help wondering at the reckless audacity of this crazy artist and his indomitable faith. The idea of matinée performances has invariably proved impractical whenever tried by the state-funded companies even in winter. Why should it succeed now, in summer?! Besides, with all the glitzy and vulgar names infesting the commercial theatres downtown, why should the moneyed, pleasure-seeking and laughter-hungry audiences who form the bulk of

the patrons of the commercial theatre make the trip to this out of the way place to watch a serious drama, albeit in the absurdist vein, sporting such an ominous name as *El-Kabous?*! But may be El-Ramli is not interested after all in that addle-pated, bovine crop of philistines and is hoping, hare-brained as the scheme may seem, to recruit new audiences just as he recruited new actors to subvert the star system. At this point, the bell rang to invite us in and put a stop to my ruminations.

The play bore all the marks of absurdist drama and carried many of its themes: loneliness, impotence, frustration, the failure of language, metaphysical and epistemological despair, existential horror, coercion, the Sartrean hell of other people — you name it. The setting and characters evoked Ionesco's claustrophobic places and horrid, grotesque families, especially in his *Jacques or The Future is in Eggs*. Indeed, the similarities between the two plays are quite striking in places and the connection is openly underlined by the dead grandfather who participates in the action through a picture frame in both plays.

Like Ionesco's Jacques, the son in the wheel-chair here is the family's ineffectual black sheep who has failed to conform and is, therefore, victimized and brutally coerced. In both plays, this figure is reduced to a baby, reinitiated, fed and then provided with a bride and urged to copulate to guarantee the continuity of bourgeois values. At the end of both plays, too, the set collapses on top of the characters to signify the imminent collapse of the rotting edifice of bourgeois life. The final stage-directions in Ionesco's play say: "A trap-door may ... open; or perhaps the stage may ... slowly collapse, and the characters — all unwittingly — gently sink and disappear without interrupting their actions." In the production I saw of El-Ramli's *Kabous*, director

Mohsen Hilmi fitted the stage at the back and overhead with coloured nets in the shape of two enormous spiders' webs and in the final scene the top one descended slowly and enmeshed all the members of the family.

Other echoes from other absurdist texts were also audible: the impotent waiting suggested Beckett; the servant-girl here suggested her counterpart in Ionesco's *Exit the King*, and the final figurative metamorphosis of El-Ramli's Egyptian Jacques into a cockroach recalled Kafka's hero in his famous short story *Metamorphosis*.

Curiously, these echoes and correspondences do not make the play into a pale imitation or patchwork of former texts; rather, they form a backdrop against which we can understand the roots of the misery that afflicts this grotesque and doomed Egyptian middle-class family. These roots, as the play reveals, lie firmly in the patriarchal structure of capitalist societies and in the bourgeois values it fosters, including the family. The father here, who was coerced by his father (who still keeps yapping at him every now and then from his picture-frame in the background though dead), goes to the oil-rich countries and comes back inflated like a balloon to coerce his family. The mother insipidly smothers her son with her love and literally stunts his intellectual growth; his desperate attempts at self-discovery, at redefining himself invariably founder on the sand of her affection. The daughter, a sex-starved, vindictive spinster, vents her rage and frustration on the maid who literally keeps the family alive, ministering to all their needs, including the sexual ones. Another brother, a drunkard and a rake, who first joins a football team then the Islamic fundamentalists, completes

the family picture. But grim as the picture may seem, the play, like all absurdist texts, and especially Ionesco's, is extremely funny, though in a black vein. The mother (played by Iman Salem), in particular, was absolutely hilarious, and so was the maid, the wonderful Abeer Fawzi. El-Ramli, too, has sought to soften the grimness a bit in places by introducing some familiar Egyptian rituals associated with birth, marriage and circumcision. These were conducted in a grotesque, frenzied manner.

The play could have worked better in performance had director Mohsen Hilmi put the reins a little on his passion for physical action on the stage. A hallmark of all his productions, it spoilt the contrast here between the deathly inertia of the family and the living energy of the maid. He gave the crippled son violent bouts of intricate, acrobatic movements – rather exhausting to watch and very much at odds with the rhythm and mood of the play. The sister, too, the beautiful and talented Caroline Khalil, began suitably mechanical and robot-like, all tensed-up like a taut string about to snap, but was soon drawn into the silly whirl of expressionistic physical gimmicks. Caroline, to be honest, resisted as much as possible and tried to salvage as much as she could of the original conception of the character and largely succeeded, thanks to her original training, sensitive face and expressive eyes. The rest of the characters were either farcical caricatures or tedious expressionistic types. I suppose the director was seduced by the energy of that group of young actors and could not resist displaying it. Nevertheless, his intelligent choice of set and sound-effects and his crafty manifulation of the chimes of the clock in the background to confuse all sense of time were highly effective.

Beauty and the Beast:*
The Accident

In 1963, John Robert Fowles published a modern and disturbing version of the old and not so innocuous tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, giving it the format of a psychological thriller and shearing off the happy ending. *The Collector* was an instant bestseller and soon transferred to the screen. There was more to the novel, however, and in a measure to the film, than the simple sadistic appeal of a kidnapping situation involving a female. The story reaches us largely through the laconic first-person narration of the male abductor; the near total suppression of the female victim's voice adds insult to injury and speaks candidly of the position of women as silent decorative possessions or *object d'arts* in patriarchal societies. Implicit also in the relationship of the kinky butterfly collector (a pallid repressed clerk who wins a fortune on the football pools) and the beautiful art student Miranda, is a palpable ironical harking back to the legendary figures of Pygmalion and Galatia. Like Pygmalion, Fowles's collector is an artist (with a few loose screws) who is irked by the coarseness and fleetingness of life and the transience of beauty; he is only happy when he can fix them in immutable form beyond the ravages of time. Whether this makes him something of a necrophiliac is open to question.

It was to be expected that the haunting celluloid version of the novel would spawn a rude brood of imitations, and it has — the worst and most recent being the films *Tie me Up! Tie me Down!* and *Boxing*

* 23 December 1993.

Helena. In such sick, sadistic male fantasies, the nearest route to a woman's heart lies through horrific torture and physical mutilation.

The situation explored by Fowles in *The Collector* fascinated Lenin El-Ramli not only for its deep insight into the power politics of male domination but also for its potential political significance in the Arab world. In his *Point of View, Welcome Gentlemen* (Ahlan Ya Bakkawat) and *In Plain Arabic*, to mention only his most recent works, political, intellectual, sexual and psychological oppression are inseparable — all different facets of the same ugly barbaric heritage. Not surprisingly, his adaptation of *The Collector* for the stage, retitled *El-Haditha* (The Incident or The Accident), brought out into the open the novel's latent feminism and underlined its wider political implications. His timing too for releasing this new version was excellent. At a time of mounting pressure to force women back into the cell of the home and the role of brainless, servile dependent, the fateful story of Qasim and Zahra can be seen as truly "a light to lesson ages". To force the lesson home, El-Ramli ends the play not with the death of the victim and the ominous promise of many more to follow, as Fowles does, but with a cunning reversal of roles. The rabid male megalomania and mad power- lust can only result in mental degeneration and universal human paralysis; for both prisoner and jailer, the springs of life become polluted and the world shrinks to the size of a nutshell buried deep into the earth.

But meeting the fundamentalists at full tilt on the issue of women, and the Arab political leaderships on the issues of democracy, freedom and human rights has not prevented El-Ramli from writing a roaring comedy. And this is where his real forte lies. Without diluting his case

or compromising it in any way, and without softening the grimness of his message, he unfailingly retains a sensitive ear for life's discordant melodies. As the pressure mounts here, and the tug-or-war tightens and intensifies between Zahra and Qasim, comedy flies off in a shower of sparks revealing the farcical absurdity of the fight and also its tragic underpinnings. The dialogue, in the congenial and poetic brand of the Egyptian vernacular typical of El-Ramli, covers a wide range of tonalities and is consistently shot through with wit and barbed satire.

At once the author and producer of *The Accident*, El-Ramli decked it out with the best talents on the market. He had already worked with director Isam El-Sayed in the *Bakawat* and the two had established a wonderful rapport. El-Sayed's vivid and lively style of direction with its sensitive rhythms, wispy lyricism and well-orchestrated bursts of physical energy suited the temperament of El-Ramli's wayward muse. The partnership worked beautifully once more in *The Accident*, or *Incident* (the Arabic title means both), particularly since the leading star of the *Bakawat* was roped in to play the male lead here as well. The enormous popular appeal of Hussein Fahmi, the Prince Charming of the Egyptian screen, was undoubtedly one reason for the choice. Still, they could not have picked a better for the part. Fahmi's lavish charisma, mischievous air, sophisticated ease and stylish panache make him ideally suited for elegant comedy. But the part here demanded more and he acquitted himself with flying colours. Like many schizophrenics and homicidal maniacs, he oozed graceful charm while managing to become more sinister and menacing by the minute. When the part demands that he rip off the mask and bare his true face, he manages the transition with startling ease and subtlety. Throughout, his movement has a disturbing flowingness about it, a snake-like creepy smoothness

that make you feel he could seep under doors and slither down chimney pots. Gradually, however, and almost imperceptibly, his bluff and genial air betrays hints of suppressed and intense brutality — the kind of ruthlessness that only lunatics are capable of.

Another inspired decision was casting the inimitable Abla Kamel as the independent, strong-minded Zahra. Her child-like, wide-eyed, subtle type of beauty which, happily, is always free of make-up on and off stage, makes her ideally suited for the part. If the kidnapper is looking for untarnished innocence to protect, she definitely fits the bill. But Kamel is also a versatile actress with immense resources. Her Zahra is the warm, living embodiment of a maturer understanding of innocence that includes in its definition courage, integrity of character, the sanctity of individual freedom of choice, respect for work and education and a sense of responsibility towards her family and dependents. Her version of innocence tears to shreds its other traditional, false images, whether sexually-centred or soppily romantic. With Hussein Fahmi, she formed a fascinating duo and the drama flowed between them rising and falling with the meticulous harmony of an orchestral piece.

Framing these two magnificent actors was a two-level set, by the brilliant Ashraf Na'eem, truly inspired in its poetry and beauty. Apart from the obvious significance of the twin basement/groundfloor design, visually indicating a dive into primitivism, the Jungian collective unconscious or the Freudian Id, the arrangement of props and colours and their intelligent coordination with the lighting acted as a sensitive mirror reflecting the play's complex web of moods and emotional tones. The upper level which remains in full view, even when not in

use, becomes progressively burdensome on the eye, suggesting a feeling of oppressive claustrophobia and imminent collapse. At the beginning, it looks like an extension of the basement and partakes of its dreary desolation, greyness and stony silence. But even when it acquires the appearance of an entrance hall in an old- fashioned villa, it still looks deserted and a bit eerie. The sense of mystery and menace also informs the incidental music of Amr Selim which is at once functional and unobtrusive.

The supporting actors, however minor their parts, were all in tune with the general excellence of the show: Amina Salem as the drunken prostitute hired by Qasim to test Zahra's feelings was delightfully bawdy and riotously funny — a veritable breath of fresh air or whirlwind in that stuffy, musty basement. Zahra's former suitors, too, who are dragged to the basement one night then dragged out to some mysterious fate, were delightfully rendered with a measure of clowning and slapstick whether performed by Sayed El-Rumi and Hamid Sayed or, alternatively, by Mohamed Radwan and Dia Abdel-Khaliq.

Having watched *The Accident* and before it Adel Imam's *The Leader* – another commercial theatre production – I am beginning to wonder if the theatre scene in Egypt has not gone completely topsy-turvy with the state-funded theatres scurrying for the safety of musicals and witless farces and the private companies undertaking the theatrical 'heavy industry'.

Tempting the Ghosts:*

Wizen Up, Doctor

Every time I go to Emadeddin street it is an emotionally charged experience — a tingling mixture of affection, nostalgia, despondency and deep resentment. Its graceful old buildings are reminders of its once elegant past when it was the hub of theatrical activity in Cairo. At present it has a tawdry, shabby look, and of its many theatres, only one remains: El-Rihani.

A visit to this old playhouse, however, whatever the quality of the play on show, is enough to reconcile you to the street. It is a treat in itself; the small ornate auditorium with its gilded statues, red velvet chairs and musty smell has an old world charm — a kind of irresistible shabby-genteel appeal. Though it carries El-Rihani's name, it is not the original El-Rihani theatre. That has another story. Back from a tour in Brazil in 1925, the great comedian could not find a suitable theatre to rent and so took the lease of an unused hall in the Radiom cafe, next to Ramses Theatre on Emadeddin street, and converted it to a small, exquisitely decorated playhouse in the style of the small Parisian theatres. It opened in November 1926, and Naguib El-Rihani and his company continued there until the summer of 1931 when a misunderstanding led Adah, the owner of the building, to terminate the lease. Adah made the theatre into a refreshment room for the British troops and eventually it was pulled down to make room for an apartment building.

* 24 August 2000.

The present theatre, which has carried El-Rihani's name since 1952, was originally a cinema called Radio. When Yusef Wahbi founded his Ramses company in 1922, he took it over and converted it into a relatively small but elegant and well-equipped theatre, paying the owner of the building — the self-same Adah — an annual rent of LE 1,200. It opened on 10 March, 1923 with *The Madam*, starring Yusef Wahbi and directed by the first Egyptian theatre director (in the European sense of the word), Aziz Eid, and continued to thrive, housing more than 150 productions — nearly two thirds of the company's total output. In 1934, however, Wahbi (who had invested all his money in an entertainment park which failed to pay off) went bankrupt and could not pay the exorbitant rent. El-Rihani stepped in, rented the theatre and rechristened it the Ritz. It continued under that name until 1952 when the government decided to name it after El-Rihani (three years after his death) in commemoration of his great work and talent. His company continued to perform there during the winter seasons until the late seventies. When it finally stopped, it could boast more than 50 productions.

Sitting in this theatre last week, I kept imagining all the great actors who had graced its boards — Yusef Wahbi, Naguib El-Rihani, Amina Rizq, Fatma Rushdi, Mary Munib, to mention but a few. I was glad the theatre, which had been out of action for quite some time, was back to work at last and hosting a play worthy of its name and history, written, directed and performed by artists of comparable stature to the old pioneers. The play was Lenin El-Ramli's *E'qal ya Doctor* (Wizen Up, Doctor), a briskly-paced, intriguing affair, steering a middle course between a reflective morality play with somewhat psychological pretensions and a romping, roaring burlesque of old movie weepies.

Though billed as a comedy it curiously, and quite disconcertingly for the audience, ends on a tragic note. But then El-Ramli invariably cares more for the integrity of his work than for audience expectations.

The setting is a mental hospital run by a scatty psychiatrist (Farouq El-Fishawi), with an unscrupulous, sycophantic, self-seeking assistant (Ahmed Rateb) and a group of weirdos for patients. Gradually we discover that the doctor of the title suffers from nightmares triggered by a repressed guilt complex. When a seemingly mentally-disordered young woman (Abla Kamel) turns up at the hospital, he identifies her as the woman who haunts his dreams and is forced to recognise his sense of guilt, admit the real cause of it and face up to his past. Taking the new patient to be the younger sister of the nurse whom he loved and seduced as a medical student, then deserted after qualifying to marry into money and social power, he believes that the cause of her ailment has to do with the fate of her deserted sister. To cure both himself and her and find out what happened to the nurse after he left her, he resorts to psychodrama as a method of psychotherapy.

When Vienna-born psychiatrist J. L. Moreno was developing his psychodramatic techniques at the Theatre of Spontaneity he founded in that city in 1917, and later at his Moreno Sanitarium in Beacon, New York, where he built the first psychodramatic stage in 1936, he little thought he was providing dramatists with a sure formula for comedy and farcical parody. In his theatrical psychodrama, projected as a play within a play, El-Ramli exploits many of Moreno's techniques (themselves derived from drama), including role-playing, role-reversal and the use of other patients as auxiliary egos to represent absent or

imagined characters. (Here they go a step further to represent imaginary settings like Shakespeare's "rude mechanicals" in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream.*) The revelations this hilarious psychodrama yields take the form of a melodrama transposed from the silver-screen to the stage in a parodic vein and in comic strip form. The story of the fallen woman, deserted by her lover after losing her honour (read virginity), ostcracised by her family and society, and forced to put her illegitimate baby in an orphanage and earn her living dancing in sleazy joints and selling her body is more than familiar to Egyptian audiences from movies and old stage melodramas. It is for this very reason, perhaps, its sheer staleness, that El-Ramli found it attractive. He has a marvellous knack for breathing new life into dead clichés and injecting novelty in stock situations and old stereotypes.

The hackneyed clichés of the fallen woman and nutty psychiatrist are here reworked for laughs, quite plausibly, within the framework of a psychodrama which involves amateurs — mental patients and a hysterical doctor. Declamation, exaggeration, over-acting, stock gestures and mannerisms look natural and unforced in such a context. El-Ramli, however, is not just out for laughs. He uses the innocent-victim-cliché, as enacted by the young woman, as a springboard for reflections on the meaning of sanity and madness, illusion and reality, of the kind we often come across in Shakespeare. Indeed, at the end, the barriers between illusion and reality become so blurred and confused, not just for the doctor but also for the audience, that we leave the theatre not knowing whether the young woman was a real person or just a figment of the doctor's imagination — an optical and acoustic hallucination set off by his guilt complex. But whether real or

imaginary, the young woman has a clear symbolic value as the embodiment of truth, purity, innocence and goodness — everything the doctor yearns for and has to forsake in the name of sanity, worldly wisdom and common sense. The tragic note at the end casts a sombre shadow over the whole play and makes it seem in retrospect a cynical morality play.

The cast, which sported three superstars — Abla Kamel, Farouq El-Fishawi and Ahmed Rateb, some familiar TV faces and a group of fresh budding talents as the patients, acted with zest and concentrated power, establishing intimate rapport with the audience at every step. Mustafa Imam's simple, functional set was adequate without any stroke of scenic imagination. It had the virtue of being uncluttered, leaving the stage free for director Isam El-Sayed's intelligent deployment of his actors and his witty use of the chorus of patients as props. Emad El-Rashidi's music, played live on a synthesiser tucked in a corner at the back of the stage, with the player dressed the same as the inmates, underlined the text's many shifts of tone and mood, ironically undercutting some scenes and emotionally enhancing others. In almost every respect, *E'qal ya Doctor* is a play that Naguib El-Rihani would have enjoyed, admired and generously applauded.

Point Counter Point:*.

Adam and Eve

Extramarital shenanigans and unlawful sexual escapades are not uncommon in Egyptian theatre and cinema. More often than not, when the eternal triangle essential for working out such themes in terms of plot and narrative involves a wife-snatcher, the dramatic treatment plunges headlong into melodrama, splashing the audience with inky sermons and acrid moral tirades and ending in gloom and doom. If the home-wrecker is a female, one could still end up with a harrowing tear-jerker or, alternatively, the plot could veer in the direction of comic intrigue, masterminded by friends or servants of the family intent on bringing the errant husband back to his nest and his faithful, saintly (and usually deadly dull and thoroughly boring) wife. In both cases, however, there is always a happy ending and, more significantly, a marked softening in the tone of moral indignation. If the adulterous husband falls prey to preaching, the sermons are usually remarkably free of the virulent fire-and-brimstone quality that characterises those addressed to a woman in a similar quandary. The reason for this is obvious; apart from the traditional lenient view of male philandering, not restricted to Egypt, Islam sanctions the right of men to have more than one wife at the same time. While Egyptian theatre and cinema rarely condone and never encourage polygamy (and seldom feature it except as a butt for humour), male adultery is never regarded as a mortal sin, a tragic moral fall, or an irrevocable social stigma.

* 15 March 2001.

The breakdown of a marriage through the husband's adultery is the focus and generative matrix of Lenin El-Ramli's latest play, *Adam and Eve*, currently at El-Rihani Theatre. And here, as in many of his previous works, El-Ramli displays his amazing knack for taking up ordinary or conventional, even hackneyed themes, stock situations and characters and reworking them in novel and unpredictable ways to transform them into vehicles for fresh and disturbing insights. The adultery theme is cunningly suppressed at the beginning, and the stage is occupied by a televised public debate on the issue of the equality of the sexes. The debaters are a prompous, pontificating male lawyer and an aggressive, warlike female champion of women's rights with a doctorate in law. The debate is heated and often violently and hilariously acrimonious, and the audience are constantly drawn into the performance, urged to express their opinions, cheer or boo and generally play the part of the fictional audience of the fictional debate.

To support their arguments, each of the debaters treats the audience to a short, live representation of the status of oppressed husbands and wives, enacted in a highly exaggerated farcical style, like a strip-cartoon or a silent movie. The two sequences stand in sharp contrast, but the antithesis does not represent a clear ethical polarity between deception and truth; the author champions neither, holding them in equal balance and leaving the audience to make up their minds. Each sequence foregrounds a set of received ideas and conventional opinions concerning marriage and highlights the power relations embedded in it which pivot round sex and money. In other words, the power conflict between the two debaters in the public arena, which takes the form of

each trying to impose his/her own reading of reality on the world, shifts in the stories they enact to the private circle of the home and a more intimate level.

This prepares the way for the next thrilling revelation: the two debaters are in fact a separated couple. At this moment one understands the reason for the bitter sarcasm, the ironic digs and the vengeful hostility which have characterised their exchanges so far. The revelation is dramatically motivated by the desire of the female debater, Dr. Hafiza, to rout her opponent by exposing his moral hypocrisy and shaming him before the world. The venerable lawyer and pillar of society is an adulterer. After a love marriage which lasted for 20 happy years, producing two lovely children and leading him to a brilliant career, he went and had an illicit affair with his secretary who is 20 years younger than himself. Rather than tell us the story, Dr. Hafiza reenacts it before our eyes with the help of the husband and his secretary.

One cannot but admire El-Ramli's timing in introducing his adultery theme. Without the previous scenes, Hafiza's story would have come across as mundane, sentimental and even banal. But those scenes had created a special context for perception and reception which shunned any simplistic, one-sided view of reality, suggesting it was more problematic and relative than the dominant ideology and its discourses would have us believe, and put the audience in a critical, inquiring and sceptical frame of mind. Inevitably, within such a context, there is bound to be another side to Hafiza's story; and her husband, Dr. Haseeb, is allowed to reenact the same events from his own point of

view. As with the sketches which illustrated the debators' opposite views at the beginning, the stories of the husband and wife stand in sharp contradiction. And, likewise, the question raised by the contradiction is not which version is true and which is false; it is, rather, whether truth is at all possible, whether a faithful recounting of events from any one point of view qualifies as the truth. Each story enacted in the play claims to tell the truth, but each one of them is formally perceived as, literally, a theatrical fabrication, prompted by the desire to dominate and impose one's own narrative. What one tends to call the truth is revealed as a fabrication and its production as thoroughly imbued with relations of power.

In this light, sexual relations, within and outside marriage (a thorny and sensitive subject, never handled with such frankness and directness before on the Egyptian stage), are reconsidered afresh without preconceived ideas. Thus, marital infidelity could appear at once as a moral sin, a betrayal of trust and the road to salvation and self-fulfilment, while sex within marriage could become a commercial transaction, a form of female oppression and exploitation or of wielding power over the male and dominating him. In a memorable scene, in the husband's account of the collapse of the marriage, the domineering wife, having discovered her husband's impotence, trots out mechanically comforting phrases, then proceeds to make a list of material demands (changing the furniture, buying a piece of land, ... etc.), triumphant in the knowledge that his humiliation has given her power over him and that in his broken state he would not dare oppose her. It was a nauseating form of blackmailing.

The play ends with a startling twist which reveals the moral hypocrisy of both husband and wife, destroying their credibility and raising the question of whether they, themselves, believed their own stories. When the daughter rushes in announcing she is going to marry one of her father's rich cronies, 20 years her senior, because he will pamper her and shower her with gifts — just as we saw her father doing with his secretary and the son declares he is in love with a girl of modest means and intends to marry her and build a love marriage of the kind we heard his mother describe, the mother and father at once switch attitudes, exchanging positions, with the mother, the ardent militant feminist, inveighing against her wily, devious sex, and the father, who had defended sexual pleasure as a life-giving force, railing against the immorality and obscenity of lewd, old men seducing young women to gratify their sexual cravings.

Adam and Eve had very little money to go on. The stage design was severely simple and functional, consisting solely of a number of painted flats and a few bits of furniture which were moved around to indicate scene-changes and suggest different sets. But with a play like *Adam and Eve*, structured round the ideas of theatrical fabrications and role-playing, the essential requirement is good, virtuoso acting. Director Mohsen Hilmi put his trust in the eternal triangle, choosing for Hafiza the superb and versatile Abla Kamel who enchanted everybody with her charismatic presence and her staggering technical and emotional range; her husband, Haseeb, was the nimble, effervescently witty and hugely popular comedian, Mamdouh Muwafi; and the beautiful, richly gifted and highly disciplined Rania Farid Shawqi was the secretary in both

versions of the adultery story. They formed an explosive trio, giving a sparkling performance, infecting everyone with their liveliness and vitality and sending waves of energy into the auditorium. I walked out of the theatre thinking that El-Ramli had finally thrown down the gauntlet in the face of the dominant bourgeois ethos and the ideological discourses which sustain it, and wondering if the people who saw the play would ever be able to perceive themselves in relation to their marriages and daily practices the way they did before.

A Modern Pilgrim's Progress:*

Like to See a Tragedy?

Lenin El-Ramli has a knack for squeezing laughter out of the most serious, even tragic facts of Egyptian life. His sharp, incisive wit, always wildly original, is like a scalpel which he cleverly wields to anatomize modern Egyptian society, revealing its festering wounds and the damaging absurd contradictions that underlie its basic cultural assumptions. He usually starts off with an urgent topical issue, an ordinary, mundane situation and familiar character types then cleverly injects them with odd or fanciful elements, in a brilliantly calculated process, which transform them into pungent, thought-provoking satirical parables.

His recurrent theme – from his earliest play, *Enta Hor* (You Are Free or, more precisely, It's Up to You) until his most recent *Teheb Teshoof Ma'sah?.. Bil Tab' La* (Like to See a Tragedy?.. Of Course Not), currently at the National – is the problem of weaving one's way through life amid the pitfalls of bigotry, ignorance, superstitions, inherited taboos, intellectual lethargy, moral apathy and cowardice; and it is always presented with intense urgency, passionate involvement and sardonic humour. In most cases, the battle is lost and the central figure is defeated. You almost never get a happy ending in El-Ramli's plays. But however sour the story turns, it is never anything short of side-splittingly funny.

His latest comedy, *Teheb Teshoof Ma'sah?... Bil Tab' La*, takes culture or, rather, knowledge, as its subject and makes of Einstein's

* 22 August 2002.

theory of relativity the starting point and *primum mobile* of the action. Samer (Mustafa Sha'ban), a teenager and ignorant hedonist living in the lap of luxury, happens to read one day in a children's comic he finds in the toilet that if you stand on the moon you see the earth above you. When he tells his friends this to show off, they ridicule him and to vindicate himself he hunts down the journalist who wrote it – a penniless and cynical former political activist who spent half his life in and out of prison and helped found half the political parties in Egypt (Abd El-Rahman Abu Zahra) – and finds him in a downtown seedy bar with some intellectuals – an existentialist critic (Mohamed Desouqi), a communist poet (Iman El-Serafi), an anarchist painter (Mohamed Ali Eddin) and a feminist novelist (Asma' Yehya) – all dead drunk. When the journalist springs upon him the theory of relativity, his mind boggles and from that moment on he embarks on an epistemological quest under the tutorship of the drunken journalist. As a first step, he disowns his father, a rich, corrupt politician (Ahmed Fouad Selim), his vain, empty-headed cronies, and elopes with Masriya (Liqa' El-Khamisi), the half-educated but sensible, astute and highly unconventional daughter of his nanny, living with her in sin and leading the life of a vagabond.

The education process, however, though extremely hilarious, proves tragic; it takes him on a perilous, giddying trip through a caricature of the history of Western and Arab thought – from Plato and Aristotle and Abu El-Ala' El-Ma'ari, through Marx, Spinoza and Rifa'a El-Tahtawi, down to Sartre, Albert Camus, Nasser and Salah Abdel-Sabour. Utterly confused and unable to digest anything, with nothing solid to cling to except those down-at-heel intellectuals who live in a constant alcoholic haze, sponging on the hard-working Masriya

(literally, "Egyptian") and perpetually spouting off slogans and quotations in the most ridiculous manner, he loses his bearings and keeps changing his allegiances. He goes through communism, humanism, Arab socialism, existentialism, adopting and shedding them off in turn until, finally, utterly disillusioned and betrayed by his intellectual mentor, he turns to Islamic fundamentalism, joins a terrorist group and forces Masriya to wear the veil. But 'the brothers' also fail him. In prison, after the police storms their hideout in a cemetery, he discovers that some of them were informers, while the rest, including himself, betray each other to save their skin. Even his love for Masriya begins to fade. At the end, he comes to the conclusion that in this relative, illusion-infested, topsy- turvy world, the only certainty is death and so commits suicide by drinking rat poison.

At this point, the actors face the audience and tell them in chorus that if this ending does not please them, they could offer them another happy one and immediately set about doing it in a farcical manner as a burlesque of old, melodramatic Egyptian movies. Samer is miraculously saved at the last minute, the knavish father repents, the ineffectual drunken intellectuals promise to reform, Masriya miraculously regains the love of Samer and all ends happily. If anything, this funny end has an acrid, stinging taste and deepens the tragic impact of the El-Ramli's ruthless analysis of the cultural crisis and intellectual confusion young people in Egypt are facing today.

El-Ramli's masterful dramaturgy was matched by the imaginative zest of director Khalid Galal and the sparkling performances of his carefully chosen vibrant and talented cast. The contrast between the seedy, middle-aged intellectuals (led by the inimitable Abu Zahra in his

best stage appearance for a long time) and the blissfully ignorant young people (led by the dynamic Sha'ban and El-Khamisi) – both equally lampooned – was a constant source of joy, sparking off squibs of scintillating comedy and Galal played them off deliciously against each other, drawing out their comic best without sacrificing the serious intent of the play or the human dimensions of the characters. But the really endearing thing about this production is that though no one is spared, and the vision it projects is truly bleak, one always senses a warm underlying sympathy with our human weaknesses, our failures, frustrations, confusion and muddle-headedness. There is some comfort in this, if in nothing else.

Mustafa Sa'd

1953-....

Walking Shadows and Poor Players:*

The 30th of February

People may be walking shadows and poor players on the stage of life, as Shakespeare would have us believe; but the actors who played out a variation on this theme in Mustafa Sa'd's new play *The 30th of February* were blissfully far from poor and were bursting with life and energy.

Starting off from a point outside calendar time, the play proceeds to question and disrupt our traditional concepts of time, reality and identity. The plot outline may seem rational enough: a disillusioned former Marxist has been thrown off balance by the political upheavals both at home and in Europe. Seeing his old world collapsing and unable to sell over or relate to the new one, he finds himself in a desolate no-man's-land and his sense of reality begins to crack. Not only does he believe that he was born on 30th February, he also suffers from delusions that he is dead. On his birthday, which he celebrates solo, his privacy is invaded by the vivid presences of a few dead comrades who claim him as one of the dead.

Naturally, this sends him haring off to the nearest psychiatrist who, as it turns out, is himself teetering on the edge of insanity. Unlike his patient, the psychiatrist has never involved himself in politics or with the affairs of men, dedicating himself totally to his scientific career and, consequently, living cosntantly in the shadow of madness. To save his own soul, the doctor commits himself, with frantic passion, to restoring

* 23 January 1992.

his patient's sense of reality and his faith in the rational order. After many months and sessions and many dangerous slips into the realms of illusion, the patient is declared cured. When the doctor pays him a friendly call a month later, however, he discovers, to his horror, that the man he has been seeing for the past three months had actually died seven years ago! He plays his recorder in a final attempt to save his sanity, but where the patient's voice should have been, there are only blanks. As a last stroke, the room is suddenly invaded by the same mysterious presences who visited the patient in the opening scene and the doctor is firmly assured that he has been dead for a long time!

Without seeing the production, it would not be difficult to give a perfectly logical interpretation of the final twist: it was all hallucination form start to finish; the patient was a figment of the doctor's deranged imagination, prompted by a deep sense of guilt and a desire for punishment. The production, however, directed by the author himself, was calculated to resist such a simple account and fought it at every step. The sudden shifts in mood and tone, the abrupt swings from realism to expressionism to music-hall comedy, burlesque and slapstick farce were defly used to break up the logical coherence of the narrative by continuously exploding our expectations. At times, indeed, the production seemed in danger of disintegrating into a whirl of scatty images. What saved it ultimately and gave it artistic rhyme and reason was the overtly theatrical mode of production the director opted for. It was as if Mustafa Sa'd had decided to take Shakespeare's verbal metaphor literally and tell us the story of a man's life in purely theatrical terms, with no concessions.

No narration was allowed here and the characters were presented literally as poor players who could not hold a part consistently or keep from slipping into theatrical cliches. The patient's confused memories and his collapsing sense of identity were played out (in a deliberately coarse, amateurish way) on a small make-shift stage, not in the manner of a cinematic, finished flashback, but as a theatrical rehearsal in progress with many objections and interruptions from the psychiatrist and many repetitions. Frequently, the characters would address the sound and lighting technicians, who sat in full view, and ask them for more light or a more suitable musical accompaniment. The patient and his psychiatrist seemed more and more to inhabit a theatrical everlasting present, at once very real and very fictional. Both the stage design and the seating of the audience contributed to that effect.

The Chamber Youth Theatre, where the play is currently on, is a small intimate hall with a versatile seating arrangement. Mustafa Sa'd and his designer Malaka M. Dawood arranged it to look like a diminutive, mock traditional theatre within a real arena theatre. Half the audience were lined up in rows in the centre facing an Italian-box type of stage at one end while the rest occupied the two upper tiers encircling them on three sides. Facing each other, across the auditorium, a table carrying the doctor's recorder and another carrying his telephone completed the set. These were visibly placed on the higher tier and had the effect of semiotically transforming the whole auditorium into the doctor's clinic. It remained, however, a thoroughly theatrical clinic, tentative, fluid and protean.

The two principal actors, Ashraf Abdel Ghafour and Ahmed Syam gave excellent performances, well studied and briskly paced. They also established immediate, intimate rapport with the audience the evening I

was there. Nevertheless, the show is not without faults. Despite its exhilarating theatricality and bubbling humour, it badly needs some verbal whittling in places to concentrate its energy. I, personally, have found its freight of political moralizing too pretentious and too heavy for comfort.

Abul-Ela El-Salamouni

1941-....

The Master Builder:*

The Man in the Citadel

In this year's theatre calendar, Mohamed Ali Pasha (1769-1849), his progeny and contemporaries will surely top the list of the most popular figures on the Egyptian stage. A case of obsessive and acute nostalgia for the first stirrings of the enlightenment in Egypt in the early 19th century is definitely indicated. The faint rumblings of the odd distant explosion and the acrid smell of busted Molotov cocktail bottles must be wonderful memory-joggers. Lately, they have conjured up the ghost of Khedive Ismail in four successive productions, *The Khedive* (still running at the Balloon), *Bahlam Ya Masr* (I Am Dreaming, Egypt – currently touring the universities of Egypt), *Sabah El-Kheir Ya Watan* (Good Morning, Motherland) and *Abu Naddara* (The Bespectacled). It was only natural that this quartet of plays should lead us backwards to Mohamed Ali Pasha, the first pioneer of the enlightenment, and the founder of modern Egypt and of the dynasty that ruled it until 1952.

From the shores of the Aegean sea (where he was born in the small seaport of Kavala in Macedonia), he came to Egypt — a soldier of the Ottoman empire in a small Albanian contingent. And the moment was ripe. The French Expedition to Egypt (1798-1801) had seriously disrupted the country's traditional political and economic structure. Popular discontent was rampant and a wave of popular rebellion swept him suddenly to the top. The Sultan's viceroy, Khurshid Pasha, was forced from his seat of power in favour of Mohamed Ali. Behind him stood the whole nation and its representatives, the Azharite *'Ulama* of

* 7 May 1994.

the Islamic Law court and the guild leaders of the artisans and tradesmen. And from then on, there was no stopping him.

He introduced many economic and social reforms, reorganized the administrative structure of the government, liquidated the Mamelukes, the former ruling oligarchy, improved the irrigation system, introduced new crops, including cotton, neutralized the religious class by turning them into pensioners of the government, built up his military and naval power, creating for the first time since the Pharaohs a fleet and army of Egyptians conscripted from the peasant class and Western-style schools to train doctors, engineers and other specialists to meet the needs of his armed forces. He was also the first ruler to send Egyptians on educational missions to European countries to train in modern techniques. Ali Mubarak, the central figure in *Sabah El-Kheir Ya Watan*, and Sheikh Rifa'a El-Tahtawi, the protagonist of *Bahlam Ya Masr*, owed their education to him.

That self-aggrandizement was the overriding motive in all he did is not doubtful, nor can one deny that many of his achievements, including the modern industrial system he attempted to construct in order to process Egypt's raw materials, did not survive his death. Nevertheless, he was, as Henry Bodwell calls him, in the only work in English to survey his reign, the "founder of modern Egypt."

The story of this man's meteoric rise to power — the terrible threat he posed to Europe and the Ottoman Sultan, and the tragic curtailment of his dreams — is nightly told at El-Tali'a theatre in a new production of Abul-Ela El-Salamouni's *The Man of the Citadel*. I found the play sufficiently impressive, if somewhat unweildy and cumbersome, when I watched it at the National ten years ago. Mercifully, in the present

production, director Naser Abdel-Mon'im has drastically reduced its redundant verbal weight, slimming it down to a neat hour and a half of gripping, fast-moving drama. This helped to crystallize the central conflict between Mohamed Ali and the popular leader Omar Makram who helped him come to power and was later exiled by him from Cairo to Damietta. In the absence of verbal clutter and linguistic debris, their complex relationship gained in force and clarity. Its latent poetry too surfaced and flowed unhampered.

Like all Cultural Palaces productions, this one is palpably low cost. So if you go expecting lavish scenery and gorgeous costumes you will be sorely disappointed. But of good, authentic acting, vibrantly fast-paced rhythm and real theatre poetry, you will have plenty. But you have to work for it, and by this I mean that you have to keep moving your head and twisting your neck from side to side throughout the performance. A substantial portion of the action takes place on two raised platforms facing each other across the hall with the audience sitting in between on both sides of the passageway that connects them. The constant turning of the head may translate for some, in terms of physical movement, the irreconcilability of the citadel at one end and the city at the other. For many, however, this seating arrangement has proved a real, not a figurative, pain in the neck. Still, the set created many delightful ironies. My favourite is that whenever Mohamed Ali tries to look out of his window at his beloved city, he has literally to turn his back on its symbolic representation at the other end of the hall. The passage too, which connects both areas, gains in significance when Omar Makram, in his final moving meeting with Mohamed Ali, says: "I am leaving for my exile; it is not an ascent, I know. But it is not a descent either. It is a level road." At this moment, one realizes suddenly

that the window at the back of Mohamed Ali's throne gives onto a void, and that his only protection against falling out are its prison-like bars. And since he refuses to tread the "level road", indeed the only road that could lead him to the city at the other end of the hall, he becomes, on the visual level, virtually a prisoner in his castle.

The director also managed the chorus of narrators and commentators intelligently to create a triple time-scheme which proved quite exciting and refreshing. For the leading role, he chose a seasoned actor, well-known for his strong, deep voice and forceful style, and Tawfiq Abdel Hamid did wonders with the part. He gave a magnificent performance that will be remembered long after the play is over. Fortunately, he found his match in Ashraf Tulba as Omar Makram and Mohamed Ali's *doppelganger*. Tulba rendered the part sensitively, without the slightest hint of histrionics, despite the many verbal temptations. Together, they gave us a wonderfully orchestrated duet. Director Naser Abdel Mon'im was also lucky in assigning the musical job to Gamal Attiya; his incidental music and melodies enveloped the show in an aura of real magic and were deeply moving without sentimental frills. In all, it is a production well worthy of the master builder of modern Egypt.

Metamorphosis:*
The Chronicle of Cows

Last year, in the course of the Free Theatre Festival at Al-Hanager, a young artist by the name of Asim Nagati presented us with a stunningly audacious version of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* with mini-skirted veiled women and bearded men in the typical uniform of Islamic extremists. A pity it played only two nights; but then a longer run would have needed the censor's approval — an extremely doubtful measure — and might have raised a big hue and cry.

I was vividly reminded of this memorable performance last week while watching Karam Metaweh's latest theatrical venture at the same venue. It wasn't only that Nagati was there on stage, in the flesh, grappling with the role of an aged vizier — an embarrassingly lifeless part — but the play itself, *Diwan Al-Baqar* (Chronicle of Cows) by Abul-Ela El-Salamouni, uses the same theatrical gambit Nagati earlier hit upon.

The Chronicle, quite obviously, owes something to Ionesco, though the author does not acknowledge it. In the manuscript which he graciously let me see, he states that the play was inspired by an anecdote related by Abul-Farag El-Asfahani in his famous book, *Al-Aghani* (The Lyrics), which dates back to the 9th century. The anecdote tells of a man who, when censured for eating in public, proceeds to prove that the public in question are no better than cows. He starts to preach at the top of his voice and attracts large crowds then tells them: "It was reported to us by many that he whose tongue can

* 16 February 1995.

reach the tip of his nose will never see the fires of hell," whereupon all present stick out their tongues and strive to lick their noses.

The opening scene of *The Chronicle* enacts this anecdote almost verbatim, but with one difference: the protagonist here (superbly acted by Abdel-Rahman Abu Zahra) is a vicious conman who trades in religion and uses it as a means to power. Exploiting the people's ignorance and their fear of hell and the so-called "torture of the grave" (currently much publicised by many preachers), he manages to dominate them completely and eventually deposes their sensual and corrupt king (Ahmed Halawa) and puts his own man, or lackey, on the throne. The only resistance he meets comes from the vizier (Isam Nagati), his enlightened daughter (Nahid Rushdi) who was educated abroad, in Europe, and a belly-dancer (Aida Fahmi) whom he first bribes to wear the veil then marries for a few hours.

In Metaweh's production, all three end up on the stake, condemned to death by fire, but the effect is diluted by a silly cheerful song which recalls the even sillier one at the beginning and drains the final scene of any element of shock. In the original text, they fare better, but not the reader. In a desperate last bid for survival, Norhan, the intellectual daughter of the vizier, challenges the new phoney regime by appealing to the people's inherent love of dancing. She urges the *ghaziya* (itinerant dancer) to tear off the veil and display her art; the *ghaziya* obliges and the forces of darkness are defeated. A few wiggles is all it takes to solve our problem here or in Algeria and Iran. El-Salamouni, of course, meant the healing and saving power of art, of all the sciences and the arts, but his choice of symbol, especially at present, was most unfortunate.

But this is not the only flaw in the text. At a deeper and more basic level, it is ideologically muddled. If we Egyptians are no better than a herd of cows, then we deserve what's coming to us. Why bother? According to the play, years of misrule have reduced the nation, barring the intellectuals and artists, to mindless dupes, making it an easy prey to the hypocrisy, bigotry and political ambitions of religious fundamentalists. Unfair as such a generalisation may be, one could acknowledge that it has some link with real life (though the causes of religious fundamentalism are much more complex and cannot be simply reduced to the influence of outside agencies). But real life is one thing and drama, however thinly allegorical, is another.

By choosing to condemn the nation he portrays at the beginning as a nation of cows (an extremely offensive epithet in Egypt and the Arab world), El-Salamouni precluded any possibility for real dramatic conflict or development, let alone for sympathetic interest. The people here begin as a herd of cows and end up as one, with only a change of rulers, which is not even a change since both rulers are equally vicious. What difference does it make if these people are first governed by a beast then by a devil? More seriously, does the art they enjoy — this herd of cows — qualify really as art? And are we expected to take their *ghaziya* — admirable in herself as she may be — as a symbol of art in general? There is also the vizier who poses an unsurmountable obstacle to credibility: how could a nation like this produce a man like that? And how could a man like that — so enlightened and so honourable — honour and obey and work in complete accord with such a beastly king?

I have no doubt of El-Salamouni's courage; tackling a sensitive and thorny issue like the one he chose is sufficient proof of it. I have also to admit that his many diatribes against the oppression of women and their reduction to sexual objects (some of which were sadly omitted in performance for censorial reasons no doubt) thrilled me despite their declamatory directness. Still, in theatre, courage is not absolutely everything. Coherence and credibility are also required, even when the writer's overriding impulse is to offend the audience and shock them into a recognition of their deplorable reality. In his *In Plain Arabic*, Lenin El-Ramli managed the wonderful feat of being outrageously offensive and disarmingly funny. He held up to the Arabs a distorting mirror which enlarged their faults, and while we laughed at the grotesque reflection, no one could deny the truth of it. By hitting on the right form and tone, he managed to make the atrociousness of his savage satire palatable, even attractive. The trick lay in a delicate mixture of styles and in their gradual pacing and intricate orchestration. He never let his anger get the better of his art and was too wise to let his audience feel that he was a cut above them. His play was written in the spirit of the typical Egyptian joke where self-confrontation and self-denunciation, more often than not, are the sources of irony and humour.

In El-Salamouni's play, one misses this "we are all in the same boat" kind of spirit. One feels that the author aligns himself with the intellectuals and artists, branding all the rest with the stigma of kine. The division is too rigid and too arbitrarily determined from the beginning. A supercilious tone sets in from the start and the effect on the audience is one of alienation — not the Brechtian alienation where the spectator is kept interested in what goes on stage while coolly

reflecting on it, but an alienation that dissociates one emotionally from the drama, causing what amounts to a total breakdown in communication between stage and auditorium, and leaves one at best bored and disinterested, and at worst, resentful and deeply suspicious of the performance.

Whichever way you look at it, and however much tolerance you exercise in view of the worthiness of the author's intentions and his bravery, the inescapable fact is that in *Chronicle* the form betrays the content. Ideally, it should have been written in the style of a quasi-documentary agit-prop play or a farcical strip-cartoon. Instead, El-Salamouni, though he dubs the play a comedy in five scenes, adopted an oppressively serious didactic tone and stuck closely, despite the fantasy façade and the expressionistic gimmickry, to the schema of the realistic, well-made play. This landed him in deep waters: the more he strove after credible, realistic characterisation and logical motives, the deeper he floundered in melodramatic clichés and declamatory muck. The sentimental vindication of the belly-dancer's profession (she was left an orphan with a brood of brothers and sisters to care for and no money or trade, so what could she do?) was the cruellest cut of all. The female intellectual, too, started off as a rebel, but soon dwindled into another cliche — that of Sheherazade.

In his production of the *Chronicle*, Karam Metaweh displayed his usual directorial flair and mastery. Unfortunately, though, they seemed to be wasted on stating the obvious. He opted for an expressionistic style, on the visual level, with a set of glass panels on wheels and shiny metal tubes that acted as distorting mirrors. The acting, however, kept erratically swinging between realism and caricature. But one could have

forgiven this, and also the clash between the vaguely historical costumes and the cool, geometrical, ultra-modern set (at a pinch, one could even justify it as representing the clash between the high-tech of modern civilisation and the old mentality), if he had shown more taste and perspicacity in choosing his music. Gamal Salama's tunes were flagrantly at odds with the spirit of the piece and painfully recalled the usual stuff (by now all too familiar) he disgorges on all official national occasions; they were cheerful, frothy and bouncy and seemed to flutter around the show like so many tattered, useless appendages.

But without the music, and given the play's flaws, the show could still have worked if Karam Metaweh had not given himself the licence of working on the text, deleting bits, modifying others and generally toning it down. One could understand his omission of words and phrases which might have given the censor a fit of apoplexy, like the king saying "every woman for me is nothing but a couple of lips, a couple of breasts, a couple of thighs and buttocks," but one is hard put to understand why he exchanged the metamorphosis of the people into typically attired fundamentalists for their metamorphosis into cows by making them don ludicrous cow-masks. The exchange knocks the purpose out of the scene and renders it completely superfluous. What is the big deal? Weren't they cows before, from the very beginning? Walid Aouni, whom Metaweh roped in to choreograph this scene, did his best, expending a lot of energy and imagination. Still, it fell flat. Metaweh had knocked the bottom out of it. What a wonderful theatrical moment was here overthrown! No wonder the show comes across as pallid, timid and mute, despite its uniformly preachy, moralistic tirades and its generally frenzied, incantatory tone. Between the two, humour had little space to breathe.

Ironically, Isam Nagati, with an imported text, next to no budget and a cast of amateurs, had managed to give us the (as yet) most forceful attack on fundamentalism. Metaweh, on the other hand, with a generous budget (from the Cultural Development Fund), superb acting talents, like Abu Zahra, Aida Fahmi, and the stylishly clownish Ahmed Halawa, and expensive music, expert choreography and decor, fell flat. Sitting in the dim auditorium, on the first night (having watched the preview and listened to Metaweh's harangue two days earlier, then watched the dress rehearsal in a desperate effort to quell my doubts), I found myself longing for the fresh, untrammelled talent of young artists and wondering why Al-Hanager, which started off as their home, incubator or, at least, umbrella, had unpredictably transformed itself into a swimming-pool for our aged, artistic whales? Why aren't we having a Free Theatre Festival this year? Has the movement completely fizzled out under the care of the Ministry of Culture? And why did Metaweh choose Al-Hanager with its elite audience? Doesn't that make his show a case of preaching to the converted? Was the show truly the crop of a workshop he conducted there for young artists? If so, why were these young artists reduced to extras and professional artists contracted? We never even got to hear the voices of the workshop trainees to judge whether they benefited from their voice-training and elocution lessons. As for their movement, it was fitfully seen in static configurations which were no better or worse than what we see in other theatres. *The Chronicle of Cows* raises many questions and remains a deeply irritating show.

Mohamed Salmawy

1945-....

Utopia in Cesspool:*

Two Down the Drain

At a panel discussion a few years ago, someone asked Mohamed Salmawy whether he was influenced in his writing by the theatre of the absurd. "Do we really have to go that far?" Salmawy quizzed him impishly. "In Egypt," he went on to say, in a more sober tone, "we do not have to import the 'absurd' or even look around for it. You will be lucky if you can avoid stumbling over it at every step or bumping into it at every street corner!"

This does not mean that Salmawy has not benefited in his theatre from the writings of such people as Beckett, Ionesco and Genet. With a BA in English literature and two diplomas in theatre from Oxford and Birmingham he could hardly help that. But like all ingenious playwrights, from Euripides and Shakespeare to Pinter and Handke, he has managed to transfigure everything he has learnt into something rich and new and to give it a thoroughly local habitat and hue.

His first play, *I Shall Tell You All*, a metaphysical farce written in the late 1960s when he was still in his early twenties, drew largely upon the 'waiting' situation of Beckett's *Godot* and depended heavily on the device of intertextuality, alternating dialogue with extracts from the Bible and some familiar English nursery rhymes. The shockingly inconoclastic nature of the work, however, was wasted on a largely non-English-speaking audience, since the text was written originally in English and performed at the American University in Cairo. It still awaits an Arabic translation.

* 5 March 1992.

Salmawy's next venture into the world of theatre was a double-bill in Arabic produced at the Avant-garde and directed by Sa'ad Ardash. *Fout Aleina Bukra (Come Back Tomorrow)* and *Illi Baadu! (Next!)* were instant hits. The simple, daily absurdities of Egyptian life were here presented in a quasi-realistic style that soon gave way to a hallucinatory, surrealistic series of images. In the two plays, waiting, both as an idea and as a situation of enduring pain and fugitive expectations, materialises theatrically as a nightmare. What looks at the beginning comfortably familiar is soon invested with horrible implications that cast terrible shadows.

In *Come Back Tomorrow*, a young intellectual, seeking a government stamp for his travelling documents, is slowly driven to the edge of insanity and despair and finally sadistically raped in one of the most daring and memorable scenes in Egyptian theatre. Stripped bare by his mealy-mouthed civil service torturers, he is crucified on the wall and branded horribly with a gigantic, phallus-like official stamp on every part of his body, sensitive or otherwise. In *Next!*, the long, endless and eternal queue becomes a concrete, visual metaphor for existential despair and unyielding political frustration.

Murderer on the Loose, his first full-length play (staged at El-Salam theatre also by Sa'd Ardash), followed after a spell in prison for political dissension. It contained a lot of autobiography and was obviously, in one sense, an attempt to come to terms with the disappointments, betrayals and many painful experiences of early youth. Salmawy, however, was able to transmute this intensely personal material into art and fashion a work of intricate formal complexity. By the end of the play, the prison cell which forms the

setting becomes a haunting riddle, at once a tomb and a womb, a satirical image of society and an existential hell.

Salome, a political reworking of Wilde's play, came next and was given a beautiful production in the open air directed by Fahmi El-Kholi with a stunning performance from actress Raghda in the title role. Technically, however, it was less fastidious than *Murderer* and its overpowering lyricism brought it closer to the nature of an oratorio. The image of the dark well, where the Baptist is incarcerated, however, formed a subtle thematic link with the earlier plays, replaying in a different key Salmawy's obsessive Hamletian metaphor of life as one big prison made up of many cells and dungeons.

In *Two Underground* (originally *Itneen Fi-El-Balaa'a* or *Two Down the Drain* also directed for the National by Fahmi El-Kholi), the metaphor surfaces again in a painfully grotesque manner. Arcadia in a cesspool would be a more apt title. Starting from the cosily familiar situation of 'boy meets girl', Salmawy spins a tale of nightmarish horror and farcical despair. When Mona and Hassan (two significant names, one suggesting hope and the other, beauty) fall down an open manhole, in broad daylight, and land in a deserted, unused sewage cistern, they find themselves sailing with Noah, in his Ark, down history and myth in search of holiness and purity. The underground world where they fall is not a fall from grace in the biblical sense, but rather an escape from a world overrun with sewage. As in *Murderer*, an authentic consciousness of human history and suffering sprouts in the dungeon and is fed by all the neglected, unpolluted subterranean streams.

The horrors of the voyage, however, are very much there. After all, as Eliot said, "mankind cannot bear too much reality." But Salmawy's

real achievement was presenting this highly sophisticated vision in a thoroughly enjoyable, accessible and deceptively simple theatrical composition. It was extremely funny too. At the National theatre, where it was first presented a few years ago, the ripples and stormy claps of laughter physically reproduced the sensation of being tossed among Noah's stormy seas.

For Hassan and Mona, however, there is no resting place, no shore. The play ends with an apocalyptical vision of doomsday, but absurdly shorn of all elevating grandeur. This is neither the time or place for soul-saving heroism. This is Egypt in the 20th century where a million children roam the streets of Cairo in utter hopelessness, and where the threat of falling down an open manhole and going physically and spiritually down the drain is a literal (and not a metaphoric) possibility.

Watching Salmawy's searingly existential and politically tongue-in-cheek punning on the play's title on the opening night at the National, I was invaded by a host of oppressive memories. But the one memory that stuck in my mind was a scene from a folktale where a girl faces a dry ditch and is required to fill it with her tears so that the image of her lover can surface and shimmer on the waters.

Ahmed Zaki's interpretation, at the AUC last week, was a much watered-down version of the text. Many scenes and characters were ruthlessly omitted. The action was pared down and the plot adumbrated. The acting, lighting, and stage design by Mohamed Hamed Ali, however, more than made up for the textual loss.

Against a telling background of grey and black, with a gaping large circle at the top of a few steps, embodying at once the idea of the 'Fall'

and the promise of the ascent, Mona El-Tunsi gave a memorable rendering of her part — funny, convincing, urgently pressing, with a touch of neurosis. Her beautiful voice was an added bonus. Ibrahim Saleh as Hassan, the beautiful and good (as his name suggests), on the other hand, was too lukewarm. He did not seem to realise the enormity of his situation. Nevertheless, he was extremely pleasing to the eye and the ear, and with a little more grinding into the facts and realities of history and the modern Egyptian political scene, he might go places.

Khalid Abul-Naga doubled successfully as the *Ma'zoun* (marriage-contractor) and Dr. Labib, the university don. It was sheer delight to watch his performance in both capacities. Omar El-Muizz, too, acquitted himself well, with plenty of panache, as the censorious, officious government spokesman. The two investigators, Arig Ibrahim and Hanadi Imam, popping out of dilapidated, rubbish-bin-like escretoires on both sides of the stage, with hard, plastic yellow helmets, looked like deranged firemen and crazed, haywire robots. Ahmed Abdeen and Muhi El-Arabi were convincing in their triple identity as chorus and angels of mercy. As the two gardeners, Hebeish and Eleish, they brought well-cued acting and delightfully human expression to a play otherwise peopled by harsh, inhuman demons.

One thing I regretted after the show: the names of lyricist Shawqi Khamis and the arbitrarily anonymous music composer did not appear on the printed programme. A shame: they provided excellent backup to a very good show.

Blow up:*

The Flower and the Chain

In 1992, the state-theatre organisation thought Mohamed Salmawy's *The Flower and the Chain (Al-Zahra wal Ganzeer)* too hot a coal to handle even with a pair of tongs. It was the first Egyptian play (indeed, work of art) to come openly to grips with the explosive issue of religious fundamentalism and engage its advocates in heated debate. Three years later, just as 1995 was folding up, the play, in a slightly modified version that sharpened its impact and boldly excised all shilly-shallying, burst with a tremendous *eclat* at El-Salam theatre. It took the irrepressible Galal El-Sharqawi – a director famous for frequently falling foul of the censor – to appreciate the play's smash-hit potential.

The plot is simple enough: an islamic terrorist tricks his way into the home of a middle class family and holds its members hostages to demand the release of fellow terrorists captured by the security forces. But the family's harrowing ordeal is shot through with so much poetry and humour, it becomes positively idyllic in a wistful, elegiac vein. One does not normally associate terrorism, violence and puritanical bigotry with old-world charm and elegance; but here, in *The Chain*, these opposites are magically fused into a tangible mood of tolerance and practical common sense.

Rather than distort the family's elegant way of life, the terrorist falls under its spell and is immediately sucked into the patterns of its polished daily routine. He may hold the family at gun point; but this does not deter the mother, Zahra (who heads a charitable society that cares for lepers) from preparing the mint sauce that goes with roast

* December 1995.

meat, nor the daughter, Jasmine, from setting the table properly for dinner. Indeed, having dinner with the family becomes for the terrorist almost a sacramental ceremony and a purgatorial act. It is at dinner that he learns to expound his views without vulgar brutality and comes closest to being a member of the family.

At every step in the progression of the plot, this illusive undercurrent of bonhommie gives a sad, ironic twinge to the violent arguments and counter arguments. The menace is always there, but, at times, it seems as if the witty, evocative dialogue has wrapped it round in shiny silk and glinting satin. The sparkling surface occasionally bursts into a riot of comic squibs, but the two-hour siege inevitably ends in suffocating smoke, deafening gun-shots and explosions.

Curiously, the blaze of the tragic ending has a wonderfully liberating effect; it seems, in a positively exhilarating way, to clear the air and the experience is too masochistically attractive to be resisted. No wonder the play has drawn throngs of viewers and is likely to continue to do so for many more weeks to come. In fact, the cast are so confident of the play's charismatic pull, they have decided to perform throughout Ramadan – a month notoriously inimical to serious theatre.

Intellectual daring, moral courage and topical relevance are some of the factors behind the success of *Al-Zahra Wal-Ganzeer*. But there is also its artistic finesse – a factor so subtle that many tend to overlook it. Outwardly, the play is blatantly realistic — almost too close to reality for comfort. But underneath the thin classical realistic façade, it has a sophisticated musical construction, with many telling leitmotifs, eloquent counterpoints and elaborate, running themes. Gradually, and almost imperceptibly, every character and object in the play (down to

the dumb grandfather clock, the cold fire-place, the shut-down piano, the wilted lotus flower, the many vases, plants and ornamental pieces) acquires a poetic dimension, becoming an image or a metaphor for something else.

The whole stage-set evokes an image of a beautiful, enlightened, mediterranean Egypt turned into a shrunken effigy — a still, sad, travesty of its former elegant, lively self. The members of the family, on the other hand, represent different generations, spanning the modern history of Egypt from the 1919 popular uprising down to the present. The memory of Gamal Abdel Nasser looms large in the background, overshadowing everything, like a long lost dream, reminding the characters and the audience of what could have been but will never be. Though a 'Nasserite', Salmawi is too good a playwright to condone hero-worship and military rule. In the play, the rule of Nasser, the dead father and absent patriarch (enshrined in a framed portrait above the silent piano), bequeathes to the present an impotent generation of drug addicts and fanatics. The angels of death who storm the flat at the end, just as the terrorist and the family are beginning to come to terms with their differences and learn to live together amicably, are not only the white-clad, bearded members of the '*Jama'at*', they are also the grimly black attired, fiercely armoured security forces.

The colours of the rainbow do not include either black or white. Ultimately, both are the negation of colour and difference. To have them so prominently framed both at the beginning and end of the play was painfully significant and had a shattering effect.

Midway through the two-hour performance, Jasmine, the 21-year old Egyptologist, asks Mohamed, the Islamic terrorist (Khalid

El-Nabawi), whether there is a place, in his promised paradise for educated women who want to pursue a career in music, ecology, physics or psychology and the answer is a definite, arbitrary NO: A woman's place is in the home. Faced with the same question, any member of the security forces in all likelihood would promptly answer likewise joining hands with the fundamentalist.

In this kind of riveting show, actors become friends – people you know and love and you feel terribly pretentious commenting on their performances. Magda El-Khateeb made a wonderful come back as Zahra and Abdel Mon'im Madbouli, as the nearly deaf and blind grandfather, was simply terrific, mixing tragedy and humour in rare, equal balance. Azza Baha' as Jasmine was overpoweringly beautiful and moving. As for Wa'el Nur and Khalid El-Nabawi, I really cannot say anything. Both were my students and I am deeply prejudiced in their favour. You simply have to go and see their performances and judge for your self. Stunning, I guess, would be your verdict.

Shakespearean Masks:*
Salome II

"A few rough marble tiles, at the top of a hill, nicknamed by the people 'hangman's noose', is all that remains of Herod's sumptuous banqueting hall where Salome once danced her fateful dance," Salmawy says in his foreword to the published text of *Salome II*, rechristened *Salome's Last Dance* for the current National theatre production. Oscar Wilde's dramatic portrayal in 1893 of the woman held by the Gospels to be the cause of Herod Antipas's beheading of John the Baptist had inspired Salmawy's earlier *Salome* which starred Raghda in a memorable open-air production at El-Manesterly palace, directed by Fahmi El-Kholi. There were no sets, only a broad sweep of steps descending from the Nilometer to the shore where some of the audience sat, while others watched the performance from the deck of a ship on the Nile. The director's imaginative use of the garden and the roof tops surrounding the Nilometer, together with Raghda's savage beauty, framed by the Nile and the night sky, her fiery, passionate acting and erotic abandon, made the play into a wild, enchanting pageant.

The production had a long successful run in Cairo, then travelled to Syria and Jordan in 1989; but the ghost of Salome continued to haunt Salmawy long after it stopped. "What happened to her after the fatal dance, how she felt and what her end was like, remained teasing questions," he says. An excursion to the ancient site of Herod's palace, 50 kilometers outside Amman, clinched the matter. At that desolate

* April 1999.

spot, where the surrounding desert bore no sign of life past or present, and the Dead Sea lay on the horizon, *Salome II* was born; but this time the imaginative resources were definitely Shakespearean.

Consciously or otherwise, Salmawy seems to have modelled his second Salome on Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Like the Egyptian queen, she is middle-aged, but "age cannot wither her"; both combine in equal measure dignity and vulgarity, sensuality and heroism, and both end up defeated, bereft of their lovers through their own actions and jubilantly embracing death in the spirit of a bride preparing for her wedding. The similarity extends to Salome's female attendants, Nardeen and Miray, whose bawdy humour in the first scene and sad task of adorning their queen for death at the end clearly evoke Charmian and Iras.

Modelling his second Salome on Cleopatra, Salmawy created a complex, intriguing character whose ambivalent status as queen and fishwife, pagan goddess and whore, murderess and victim would attract and challenge any actress. Nevertheless, I was genuinely surprised when I heard that Sohair El-Murshidi had accepted it. For the best part of her stage career, she had formed with her late husband, director Karam Metaweh, a politically committed artistic couple and her repertoire had largely consisted of patriotic parts which symbolically projected her as Egypt or the moving spirit of the nation. For months after playing Tawfiq El-Hakim's *Isis* (directed by Metaweh for the National in the 1980s), she appeared at many social occasions dressed in the costume of the part and seemed obsessed with the character. I remember asking her once in Tunis, the year she was honoured by the ministry of culture there, whether she didn't get tired sometimes of those parts which did not do full justice to her range as an actress and

whether she would not like for a change to take on Medea, Clytemnestra, Lady Macbeth or Blanche du Bois. "But would the audience accept me in such parts?" she wondered; after a moment's reflection she added, "I am not sure I can feel at home in them, and I want the audience to love me."

Well, she seems to have changed her mind, and good for her. Rather than a national heroine, she competently plays here a woman in love who, driven by guilt, remorse, immortal longings, and a mad defiance of death, embarks on a suicidal course and leads her nation to destruction. Although she believes in the curse she has brought on the land when she was inveigled by her mother to ask for the head of the Baptist (consistently referred to as al-Nassiri — "the Nazarene" — in the play to underline his symbolic role as Nasser – a national rather than religious saviour), and therefore watches passively as her kingdom rots and crumbles under her feet and is overrun by rebels (all Nazarenes/ Nasserites), she does not surrender to her fate without a good fight. Unfortunately, however, Salmawy denies her Cleopatra's graceful exit; instead, he allows an angry mob to stone her to death – a messy and most undignified way to die. It is, however, a plea for sympathy and understanding since it usually evokes the biblical warning "let him who has not sinned cast the first stone."

The challenge El-Murshidi faces nightly is familiar to any actor who has tried on *Macbeth* — namely, to work against the political grain of the play and its dominant message, which ultimately damns the character, try to raise it to a broader existential plane of universal human significance, and project as sympathetically tragic figures whose monstrous deeds make them as black as hell. El-Murshidi had my full

sympathy as she heroically grappled with one particularly repellent sacrificial ritual in which she suavely poisons one of her young worshippers in cold blood to use his body as a vessel for the spirit of her lover which she means to conjure up. This was followed by reincarnation rites, complete with smoke machine and three witches who seemed to have been hastily summoned from *Macbeth* to display their antics at the National.

Considering that the costumes in this production are a disaster and make the actors look like farcical figures taking part in a cheap masquerade (I am promised they will be changed), and despite the clumsy and embarrassing directorial management of some scenes (particularly Salome's bath scene which, in the interest of chastity, perhaps, was barely visible and all one could see of El-Murshidi was a bobbing head in the distance with a ridiculous crown of red roses on top, or a modestly clad leg suddenly sticking up), El-Murshidi coped admirably. She negotiated with skill the many transitions of mood and the tricky lyrical passages and amorous monologues; but she was really at her best in the realistic scenes when she had real people to talk to rather than ghosts or witches.

The real surprise of the evening, however, was popular comedian Abdel-Mon'im Madbouli who made me suddenly realize how close the character of Herod as written by Salmawy was to Lear after his mind gives way. Looking pathetically frail and old in a shabby dressing-gown, and doddering around the stage, dropping pearls of wisdom, he was every inch the Shakespearean decrepit, dethroned king, driven to insanity by ill use, and gaining wisdom as he loses his reason. Creating comedy in classical Arabic is never easy and few comedians attempt it;

but here Madbouli handles it with masterful ease, revealing a new range of comic invention, and displaying his usual wonderful sense of stage effect and sure command of tone and gesture. As Herod, Madbouli's performance surpasses anything he has done before and consolidates his reputation as one of the greatest comedians Egypt has known.

Other pleasures were Rageh Dawood's score, Maya Selim's choreography of Salome's first and last dances, Sekina Mohamed Ali's simple, uncluttered set, and Qasim El-Badawi's lighting. But the choice of venue was not in the interest of the play. It needs a larger, untraditional and more versatile space. In the circumstances, director Hana' Abdel-Fattah had to use the sides of the balcony and the auditorium aisle and entrance which entailed a lot of painful neck craning and twisting and turning in one's seat – hardly conducive to comfortable viewing or concentration.

Samir Sarhan

1941- ……

Back to *Rod-Al-Farag**

As I drove down to Rod El-Farag Cultural Palace which stands where the old vegetable market used to be, across the road from the Nile, I was flooded by memories. The tidy, greenless cornishe, parched by neglect and the sun, and eternally swimming in a thin haze of smoke, seemed to melt away. Another image, shadowy and faded, but unbearably beautiful and painful, slowly floated up from the depths of childhood memories to take its place: a dusty shore of earth and lush vegetation – and slippery, muddy patches in winter – sloping down to the river at the end of a tram-line on which bright yellow carriages chugged gently under the graceful trees bordering the route from Shubra street, through Rod El-Farag, to the Nile.

Before her family grew, forcing her to give up her little pleasures, my mother used to take us there, my elder sister and I, to watch the sunset on the water and remember her hometown in the north, in Kafr El-Sheikh, the greenest part of the Delta. We never stayed after dark, never saw any bars or nightclubs blaze into life at night. I read about them later; but by that time they had disappeared. The chronicles of the Egyptian theatre tell us that the beloved shore of my early childhood was the earliest playground and nursery for many actors, singers and dancers in the twenties, and remained the home of many small theatrical groups, offering music hall and variety shows at Monte Carlo, San Stefano and other less famous cabarets well into the forties. Comedian Ali El-Kassar, though he had his own theatre in the more respectable Emadeddin street, never neglected Rod El-Farag, often performing

* 16 March 2000.

there in the summer, side by side with the company of Fawzi Muneeb, who shared El-Kassar's dark complexion and therefore plagiarized his vaudevilles and the comic character of the dark Nubian, Osman, which El-Kassar devised and was famed for. Amina Rizq too mentions in an interview that she first became infatuated with theatre when her family moved to Rod El-Farag, and she used to sneak out with her young aunt, Amina Mohamed, and make their way to the Nile to join the thespian carnival held there every night.

By the time I knew that shore, it had become a twilight area; the carnival had dwindled and all but disappeared. But even in its heyday, it had been marginal, on the fringe of the theatrical mainstream in Emadeddin street, the home of such illustrious companies as Ramses, Fatma Rushdi, and Naguib El-Rihani. Now, in the year 2000, the Nile shore at Rod El-Farag bears no trace of its former rich night life; it has no theatres, cabarets or nightclubs. Emadeddin street, too, has fallen on hard times, becoming drab and squalid. It still has some cinemas; but of its many theatres, only one, El-Rihani, has survived.

Just as the Nile of Rod El-Farag is deeply embedded in my childhood, Emadeddin street is a precious part of my youth; and last week, the two merged together in my memory through a play and a place: a revival of Samir Sarhan's *Rod El-Farag* at the cultural palace of Rod El-Farag.

Rod El-Farag first opened in the Spring of 1982 at Mohamed Farid theatre (later called El-Hakim and now defunct) in Emadeddin street. It was an instant hit and seemed destined for a long run. It closed however after only 18 performances when a fire destroyed the stage, the dressing rooms and part of the auditorium. The real cause of the fire

remains a mystery now as it was then. The official report blamed it on an electrical fault, waving aside the initial, and familiar, lighted-stub-of-a-cigarette theory. Nevertheless, rumours buzzed around that it was ARSON. The culprits, it was widely and warily whispered, were not, as one might reasonably expect (given the religious sources of the play) anti-theatre Islamic extremists (of the bigoted, ferocious breed incubated and nurtured by the regime in the universities in the seventies), but agents of the former president's clique who regarded the production as anti-Sadat propaganda and a vindication and glorification of his assasin and, therefore, wanted to put a stop to it at any price.

Fortunately, there was no loss of life. The fire took place when the theatre was deserted, and though it caused extensive damage to the acting and tiring spaces and effectively reduced the play's elaborate sets and costumes to ashes, it did not spread to the rest of the building. Ironically, however, this added fuel to the rumours, and the fact that the late Karam Metaweh, who directed the play, and his wife Sohair El-Murshidi, who starred in it, were outspoken critics of Sadat's policies and the Camp David accord did little to dispel them. Those who had seen the production gave credence to the rumours and found incontrovertible motive for foul play in Metaweh's management of a particular scene which features the assassination of a British officer during the British occupation of Egypt: he froze the scene at the moment of shooting while Ali El-Haggar, in a voice-over, chanted an emotive patriotic song, egging on the assasin and blessing his hand. Indeed, for many, not all of them Sadat-sympathizers, that scene had come across as brash, gloating and quite repulsive.

I remember racing down to the theatre in anguish that distant spring evening in 1982 after a brief call from the author telling me the news. Mohamed Farid was not only one of the oldest theatres in town, a veritable historical site, but one where I had many cherished memories. It was there that I made my single public appearance on a real stage as an actress during a student festival of Shakespeare's plays in 1964. I had also frequented it almost daily during my last two years at university to watch plays, attend rehearsals, visit friends at the *Theatre Magazine* offices it housed, or simply hang around actors. They fascinated me then, and still do, though the magic has somewhat diminished. It was also there that I met my first boyfriend, a stage-struck young Armenian from Shubra who loved not me but my performances of Hermia and Desdemona. No wonder the romance did not long outlast the brief theatrical glow bestowed upon me by the Bard.

There were two fire-engines, some policemen and a small crowd outside the theatre when I arrived. The fire had been put out, but there were hoses everywhere and a clutter of objects on the drenched pavement and at the entrance. As I waded through the water inside, choking with the heavy smell of fetid wetness and acrid smoke that clung to everything, I felt that a precious part of my youth had been irretrievably lost, and at the sight of the charred, gutted out stage I burst into tears. I was only one in a chorus of weepers. The only discordant note came from Metaweh: he was angry, *very* angry and made a lot of accusations aloud and under his breath. I remember thinking in my misery, quite unreasonably of course, that if half of what I overheard him saying was true, then I should never forgive him for having incensed whoever it was to the point of ruthlessly setting fire to the

theatre. It seemed at the time that no production, and particularly that production of his, was worth it. I had seen it and thought that he had warped the text to serve his own ideological ends and sacrificed its taut tragic design and sophisticated human complexity for a kind of spurious topical pertinence.

Sarhan's play was written at least one year before Sadat was gunned down. He never intended it as a vehicle for the kind of thinly camouflaged political criticism that flourished in the theatre of the sixties. Indeed, by temperament, education and training, he flinches from the immediately topical, the openly didactic or politically transparent, believing they are of transient value and can only touch the surface of life. The major influences on his work are Ibsen, Chekov, Miller and O'Neil, rather than Brecht or Peter Weiss, and even his most knavish characters are drawn with sympathetic understanding, mild sarcasm and gentle humour. After an early realistic moral satire, *The Liar* (never performed), and a satirical fantasy, *A King in Search of a Job* (performed 1972), about a topsy-turvy imaginary kindgom ravaged by drought and famine, he turned to his favourite mode of psychological realism and his favoured subject, the tragic human condition. In *Sitt El-Mulk* (performed at the National 1987, starring Nur El-Sherif and Samiha Ayoub and directed by Abdel-Ghaffar Ouda), he reinterpreted the character of the mad, 11th century, Fatimid ruler of Egypt, El-Hakim bi Amrellah (literally, he who rules by the order of Allah), presenting him as a complex, tormented, existential hero, driven insane – like Albert Camus' Caligula – by immortal longinings, and destroying many people, and ultimately himself, in his quest for divine knowledge and wisdom.

His next play, *Rod El-Farag*, took its inspiration not from history, but from Greek legend and Holy Scripture. The story of the legendary Phaedra who falsely accused her stepson, Hippolytus, when he spurned her incestuous passion, merges with that of Potiphar's wife and her attempted seduction of Joseph, mentioned in both the Quran and the Bible. Originally, Sarhan boldly titled his text *Imra'at Al-Aziz (The Wife of the Ruler)*, which is the term used in the Quran to refer to Potiphar's wife. Predictably, there was trouble with the censor, not only on account of the title, the presentation of a sacred figure on stage (prohibited by Al-Azhar), and the incest theme, but also because the heroine's monologues were redolent of sexual passion and abounded in erotic imagery of the kind found in the Psalms and the Song of Songs. The offensive passages had to be excised, the title was changed to the innocuous *Rod El-Farag* (the setting of the first part which presents the heroine, Zubayda, as a singer in a sleezy joint owned by a Greek in the forties), and the hot-headed revolutionary, Yusef, who assasinates the British officer at the joint, became not a real but an adopted son of the modern Potiphar/Theseus, Aziz Pasha.

In the text, the political assassination which stirred up such a hornet's nest in the 1982 production serves only to trigger the action which consists mainly in the exposition and development of the conflicting passions and tangled loyalties of the Aziz-Yusef-Zubayda triangle and the intricate power-game of domination and subordination which engages all the characters, including the obsequious, sycophantic timeserver Fahmi, the Pasha's personal secretary, the manipulative, parasitical Aref, the brother of his first deceased wife, and even Wadi', the old, defeated, alternately cynical and melancholic poet who looked

after Zubayda when the British killed her father. Indeed, the strength of this play lies in its complex characterization, almost unparalleled in modern Egyptian drama, its subtle orchestration of mood and feeling, and its daring airing of sexual passion and almost unprecedented questioning of traditional ethics, particularly where sex is concerned.

For a play of such complexity and such a sensitive subject to be performed in Rod El-Farag, before the conventional, unsophisticated audience of its cultural palace, is a feat in itself; that it came across so powerfully, surpassing in its impact Metaweh's lavish, gimmicky production, with non-professional actors, and despite the crude performance conditions (a makeshift stage inside a small marquee, with primitive lighting, decor and sound equipment), is a marvel and a real credit to its dedicated cast, its director, Mohamed El-Shabrawi, stage and costume designer, Mahmoud Gamaleddin, and composer, Rami Wagdi. I left Rod El-Farag cheerfully thinking that with more shows of this calibre, the area can perhaps recover something of its scintillating theatrical past.

Sherif El-Shoubashi

1945-....

The Rest is Silence:*
Jerusalem Shall Not Fall

Political plays with a clear simple message can be deadly dull and boring; but they are never that with Nur El-Sherif around, taking the lead. His presence onstage adds depth to any words he utters, giving a very convincing illusion of complexity and profundity to the obvious or glaringly mundane. His superb style of acting, always sophisticated and finely-honed, invariably communicates a warm sense of deep conviction, of touching, wide-eyed, often bewildered innocence, but tinged with a tone of subtle irony and an elusive whiff of bitter resignation. It is a style that has often worked wonders with otherwise unpalatable fare.

Not that Sherif El-Shoubashi's *Jerusalem Shall Not Fall* (his first venture as dramatist) is not a really brave effort in the direction of agit-prop theatre and compares very favourably with many attempts in the same field. The secret of its appeal is its unpretentious approach, clear, succinct message and rather novel structure. Formed of two parts with two different sets of events and characters, two contrasting heroes (both played by Nur El-Sherif), two different locales (Jerusalem and Baghdad) and two rival dynasties (the Abbasids with a Caliph ruling from Baghdad and the Fatimids with another ruling from Cairo), it offers variety and plenty of scope for spectacle and imaginative theatrical display without splitting apart. Both parts are joined by the theme of betrayal on which each is a variation; and the sense of unity

* 31 January 2002.

and continuity stems from the continued presence of the citizens of Jerusalem on stage as the victims in both sections.

In the first part they are betrayed by the leader of the city's garrison who fails to get the necessary help from the Caliph in Cairo to resist the foreign invaders and subsequently deserts the city and absconds with his army, trading the safety of the people in his charge for a promise of safe passage for himself and his men. The second part follows logically as the citizens who flee the carnage embark on a long and arduous trip to Damascus to seek the help of its honourable, patriotic Chief Justice in a desperate attempt to save the city before it is too late. This takes them on another trip, this time to Baghdad and its Caliph who proves no better than the one in Cairo; his court is a grotesque mockery, infested with sharks, crooks and charlatans. In the face of such rampant corruption, even the good hero of the second part is helpless and ineffectual. The cycle of betrayal is once more enacted on a wider scale and Jerusalem is hopelessly lost. The fact that the two heroes, the true and false, are played by the same actor makes betrayal and corruption seem like the ineluctable fate of the Arabs and the contrast between them, held firmly before our eyes throughout, acts as a bitter satirical comment on what we see without need for verbal overstatement, political hectoring, or facile patriotic declamation.

Fahmi El-Kholi directed with flair and panache without sacrificing the clarity and straightforwardness of the text. He used plenty of colour, particularly in the costumes (designed by Mahmoud Mabrouk) and lighting effects as if to offset the blackness of vision presented on stage; and though the set (which he himself designed) was a little too elaborate and bulky for this kind of play and sometimes clashed with

the simple epic mode of acting adopted by the supporting cast, it created a multidimensional space which made the transitions in place and time smooth and fast, without need for lengthy blackouts.

The action unfolds against the famous dome of Al-Aqsa mosque, which forms the visual centre of the stage, hitched up high, with six mobile staircases attached to it which could be raised and lowered to create different levels and locations. As an added bonus, and whether by chance or design, the ropes from which the set was suspended provided an added ironical visual element, occasionally making the characters look like marionettes suspended from the hands of an unseen puppeteer – which tallies with the play's ironical bent and satirical portrayal of Arab rulers and their flunkies. Indeed, the last words in the play strongly corroborate this impression. At the end, when everything is lost, Nur El-Sherif, as the Chief Justice of Damascus, stands facing the audience and sardonically quotes a phrase, exactly two words, from a famous satirical poem by the renowned Arab poet, Al-Mutanabbi, who belongs to the Abbasid era, on the state of the Arabs; he simply says: "Ya ommatan dahikat ..."; he did not need to say more; every one in the audience could finish the line for him which goes: "min gahliha al-umamu." ("The whole line reads: O nation whose ignorance has made you the laughing-stock of all other nations.")

The irony is compounded if you remember the first part of this verse in which the poet lampoons the religious hypocrisy of those who stick fervently to the shows of piety and outward forms of religion while ignoring its spirit. It goes: "Is the ultimate aim of religion trimming you moustaches?") – a pointed reference to the practice of shaving moustaches and growing beards claimed by some as part of the

'*Sunna*' (reported words, acts and habits of Prophet Mohamed). For most of us who could remember this line, it did not seem that time had moved on at all since the days of Al-Mutanabbi. The impact of those two words — "Ya ommatan dahikat" — was shattering and part of the effect was due to the way Nur delivered them, so quietly, in his controlled style, without emotional redundancy. He just looked at us and said them, with the kind of hopeless disdain that comes from utter disillusionment; "Ya ummatan dahikat ..." and then stopped — the rest was silence.

For a political play of the agit-prop (agitational propaganda), it was such a fresh and stirring end which very few actors would dare perform as a finale. The temptation here for any other actor, to scream at the top of his lungs, would have been simply irresistible. But with what is happening actually in Jerusalem at this very moment, Nur El-Sherif had the integrity not to try to delude the audience with rousing diatribes, impassioned speeches or false heroics that can only have a hollow ring. None in the audience would have believed him. Instead, what we saw was consistency — Nur never raised his voice once throughout the play, showing instead repressed emotion reflected in the deep tones of his voice, as well as in the elegant economy of every movement and gesture.

Of course the burden of *Jerusalem* fell squarely on El-Sherif's shoulders; but luckily, he was supported by a magnificent cast of young actors who doubled in many parts, performing both the funny and sad scenes with ease and confidence as well as playing the chorus with great harmony. I mention comedy because, surprisingly, despite the gloomy vision enacted on the stage, *Jerusalem* is full of bright flashes

of humour, wrung out of the deepest moments of despair. What we had in this play was a painful reminder of the long history of lost chances of the Arab nation, over centuries, through our own stupidity. The relevance here was not simply of subject-matter, but that dreadful feeling of humiliation and sense of impotence that seems to be dogging our lives, drilled into us by the media almost every minute.

Apart from the cartoon-strip portrayal of the rulers and their ridiculous antics, which raised many a laugh, the most hilarious and endearing moment was when the High Judge, banned from gaining access to the Caliph, thinks up a ruse to ensure his admittance: he simply sits down in the middle of the street and breaks his fast openly at midday in Ramadan. At once everybody is up in arms against the Terrible Sin. Compared to this, the fall of Jerusalem paled into insignificance. Guards were summoned, jail was threatened, and the whole palace rose up in arms to defend the sacred rules of religion. This quite daring, barbed quip was directed against the narrow-minded religious dogmatism prevalent nowadays.

There was also a significant dig at the position of women in those long-ago sumptuous courts, full of salvegirls regarded as part of the possessions of men and part of the trappings of power and glory. This happened in the final scene of the first part, when the military hero, the leader of the garrison, is about to save his skin and lead his men out of the city without even bothering to secure a treaty with the enemy to save the inhabitants from the inevitable massacre that will surely follow. His favourite concubine, gently and sensitively played by the tall and graceful Liqaa Sweidan, refuses to join him and tries to dissuade him from this disastrous course of action. He refuses to listen, orders her to

retire to her room where he will promptly join her, but she finally opposes the patriarchal codes of obedience and decides to stay and die in her beloved city. A lot of the humour also came from the antics of the ruler's courtiers, who attempt to extort bribes from the Judge and the penniless, homeless refugees, as a price for seeing the Caliph, and assiduously present a rosy picture of life to him.

The emotional impact of the show gained a great deal from Wafaa Wagdi's lyrics, Mounir El-Wesseimi's music and Afaf Radi's stirring voice which seemed to provide an emotional undercurrent underlying the whole show. In the poses of the supporting actors especially, Fahmi El-Kholi borrowed a few details from the arts of the Far East, postures suggesting monkeys and recumbent animals, and various other colourful touches.

Outwardly, the first impression *Jerusalem* would suggest is something similar to a patriotic Peking Opera. The paradox this created was that the ultimate message of the show could not be further from the purposes of such operas: the Peking Opera glorified the struggle of the Chinese nation, particularly during the reign of Mao Tse-Tung; Jerusalem was a poignant, elegiac celebration of defeat.

Sa'dallah Wannus

1941-1997

By Way of Introduction and Farewell:*

Beyond the Pale

Of his generation, Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannus (1941-1997) is perhaps the best known in the Arab world and the most widely read and performed. After a short piece, *Tales of the Statue-Chorus*, written in 1965, he made his real debut with a savage political satire on the Arab regimes who caused the 1967 defeat. *The 5th of June Party*, written in 1967 in the aftermath of the so-called 'setback' and performed in 1968, took Arab theatrical circles by storm and proved an instant hit. In a highly theatrical form that relied on the interaction of stage and auditorium and invited the active participation of the viewer, it vividly dramatised the traumatic sense of disillusionment and betrayal experienced by all Arabs in those days. It opens with a group of actors preparing to stage a play that dramatises the official media version of what happened in the war, with an officious stage-manager presiding over the proceedings, and ends with a mock audience taking over the stage to tell the real story in a series of scenes that mix acting with commentary and narration. It was a daring theatrical experiment, not only politically (Wannus was called for investigation before the military intelligence service) but artistically as well, and firmly placed Wannus among the avant-garde playwrights of that period.

Wannus's next play, *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber's Head* (1969), was equally revolutionary in its content and dramaturgy and was banned on the opening night. Based on an old popular story, with vague historical origins, it is a cautionary tale against collaboration with

* 22 May 1997.

oppressive rulers and tyrants in the hope of gaining individual salvation. When a city is besieged and the sultan is at a loss how to sneak a message out to ask for outside help, a wily and ambitious slave called Jaber comes up with an ingenious solution to the sultan's dilemma: he shaves his head completely bald, and after the message has been written on it in indelible ink, he lets his hair grow back again until it completely hides it, then slips out of the city. When he reaches his destination, his head is shaved bald and the message is delivered — only the sultan who had promised him wealth and freedom had not forgotten to add at the end of the message a small postscript saying: "please, when you have read the message, chop off Jaber's head."

This funny story is told in a series of sceenes that alternate between the sultan's palace and the city streets and contrast the sumptuous wealth of the former with the abject poverty of the latter. And once more the dramaturgy here, as in *The 5th of June Party*, exploits many of the techniques of Brecht's epic theatre (widely popular in Egypt in the sixties where Wannus spent four years studying journalism at Cairo University) and merges them with some indigenous forms of popular entertainment in an attempt to forge a kind of theatrical experience that would feel 'authentically' Arab while forcefully advocating socialism. In this, Wannus was politically and artistically following closely in the footsteps of such Egyptian playwrights as Yusef Idris, Mahmoud Diab, and Naguib Sorour, among others.

In the same year, 1969, Wannus produced another political parable, *The Elephant, O King of All Time*, based on an Indian folktale that portrays the disastrous consequences of fear and submission. Artistically, it is a modest achievement and lacks the acrid humour and

pungent irony of previous works. Four years later, in 1973, Wannus recovered his technical ebullience and *jeu d'esprit* in *An Evening with Abu Khalil El-Qabbani* in which he reverted to his favourite theme: theatre. Unlike the pretentious stage-manager in *The 5th of June Party*, El-Qabbani, one of the earliest pioneers of theatre in the Arab world, was a rebellious artist who defied the traditional religious hostility towards the art of representation in the sixties of the 19th century, had his theatre closed and company disbanded by the authorities, and had to flee Syria for Egypt where he played a seminal role in the development of the Egyptian theatre. The choice of El-Qabbani and his company as a theme was no coincidence; Wannus did not make a secret of his admitation for the man or the kind of popular musical performance he had evolved, and deliberately modelled his *Evening*'s entertainment along the lines of a typical Qabbani show.

The same exuberant theatricality informs Wannus's next play, *The King is the King*, which marks the end of the first stage of his dramatic career and its highest point. Here, he borrows a tale from the *Arabian Nights* (as El-Qabbani often did) to argue that no one is born royal, that no king or ruler is recognisable without the props and trappings of power and that the political machine is an elaborately staged masque. In the Arabian tale, a king plays a practical joke on a ruined merchant making him believe he is king for one day. The tale ends happily: the king has his sport and the beggar who swallowed the bait is richly rewarded. In the play, however, the joke is cruelly turned upon the king as he watches with dazed, incredulous eyes his theatrical illusion usurping his crown, queen and courtiers. The dramatic structure is beautifully symmetrical, consisting of two parallel and contrasting parts: one about the transformation of beggar into king and the other about the

transformation of king into beggar. In the stage directions Wannus insists on the use of ritual, stylised movement and gesture, a symbolic setting with a spiral throne, and unnaturally voluminous costumes.

The King is the King was written in 1977 and was followed by a long period of silence which lasted 13 long years. Wannus was not singular in this; other Arab dramatists too went silent at the time, some of them forever. The world had changed around them; many illusions had been shattered, many idols had fallen, the socialist dream had collapsed, and Arab nationalism was no longer a viable cause. Wannus, as he admitted in an interview with Syrian drama critic Mary Elias, needed time to sort out himself and his world. It was a period of deep soul-searching and self revision and he came out of it "washed clean of all illusions," as he put it. The defiant spirit and fighting optimism of the first stage of his career gave way in the second (and sadly last) to deep intellectual pessimism, bordering on nihilism.

In 1990, Wannus broke his long dramatic silence with an adaptation of Antonio Buero Vallejo's play *La Dobla Historia del Doctor Valmy*, set in the context of the Arab-Israeli struggle and renamed *Rape*. In it one detects not only a change of mood, of technique and intellectual outlook, but a broader sympathy, an aversion to brash and facile moral judgements and a new interest in individual human suffering. Here, and in all the plays that followed until his death, the dramatic conflict gains in depth and complexity and is no longer a simple and simplistic confrontation between two separate, well-defined and morally identified forces. The characters are no longer types, symbols or ideas, but real people facing real existential and moral dilemmas. This does not mean that Wannus's last, and by critical consensus greatest plays have left politics behind and turned to 'human'

themes. Indeed, they are extremely political, but in the deepest, most comprehensive sense of the word — a sense which is best summed up in the slogan "the personal is political".

If the earlier plays assumed that a better system of government and distribution of wealth would create a better Arab world, the later plays demand no less than a thorough revision and fundamental re-evaluation of the cultural heritage of the Arabs and their way of life, including their attitudes to women, love, sex, marriage and even homosexuality, incest and conjugal fidelity. No wonder that in these last plays — *A Day of Our Times* (1993), *Historical Miniatures* (1993), *Anguished Dreams* and *The Rites of Signs and Changes* (1994), *The Mirage Epic* (1995) and *Drunken Days* (1996) — women are given prominence while the conventions and traditions of the patriarchy are savagely anatomised. Whether the setting is historical or the present, and whether the scope is limited or panoramic, the individual is shown in confrontation with different value systems and modes of apprehending human existence, while the content of experience remains shifting and relative.

Many critics have described these last plays, particularly *The Rites* and *Anguished Dreams*, as the most daring and outspoken in the history of Arab drama. And they are right. They were written, in feverish succession, at a time when Wannus was daily staring death in the face and had nothing more to fear.

A Visor for a Visor:*

The King Is the King

In the old Chinese tale, the emperor is wheedled by his tailor into parading the streets in nothing "but vain fantasy" and the sumptuous fabrics of the imagination. That emperor did not know how lucky he was to have remained recognizable as such without the outward shows of power; when a child cried out: "The emperor has no clothes on," he was deeply chagrined and scurried home naked, but he was still an emperor.

Such an incident, however embarrassing, would have been the salvation of the unfortunate king in Sa'dallah Wannus's masterpiece *The King is the King* (now at El-Salam theatre); but no such luck. His clothes are all too real, and when he slips them off for a whim, he tragically discovers that a king is nothing but a theatrical fabrication, a visor that has no visage underneath.

The play is based on a tale from *The Arabian Nights* in which a king, in the habit of wandering among his people in disguise when bored, seeks to amuse himself further by playing a practical joke on a ruined merchant who is given to consoling himself with fanciful visions of power and delusions of grandeur. Wannus gives him a further trait: he makes him an alcoholic with an extremely hazy sense of identity. Having doused his victim with wine, the king carries him senseless to his palace, decks him out in royal robes and places him on the royal bed. The beggar will be king for one day. The Arabian tale ends happily: the king has his sport and the beggar, who is pushed to near

* 14 March 1991.

insanity, is richly rewarded. In the play, however, the joke is cruelly turned upon the king, and the engineer is hoist with his own petard.

The mock rituals of coronation (translated in the production into the rituals of the *subu'*, a celebration marking the first week of a baby's life) announce the beginning of the nightmare and also the second part of the show. The king who, unlike his Arabian prototype, had not taken his court into his confidence (to laugh at their bewilderment when they spot the change) watches with dazed incredulous eyes his theatrical illusion magically usurping his crown, queen and courtiers and even his vizier who was in on the hoax. His hopes momentarily revive when the wife and daughter of the fabricated king arrive to seek justice at the court but are promptly dashed when the man and his family fail to recognise each other. As the real king's identity gradually pales out into his merchant disguise, his mind gives way, and the latent irony of the title bursts upon us with full force. The king, after all, is and, paradoxically, is not the king. This paradox is built into the structure of the play with two parallel and contrasting parts, each dramatising one interpretation of the title. A Brechtian chorus is also provided to question and comment, expanding the political significance of the paradox and relating costume to class distinction.

In the printed text, Wannus, who has a very powerful theatrical sense, insists in the stage directions on the use of ritual, stylised gesture, and a symbolic setting with a spiral throne. The royal costume too comes in for a lot of attention; it should be unnaturally voluminous. In the current production at El-Salam, director Murad Munir makes very few changes in this visual conception and adds a few brilliant and inspired touches. Most remarkable, perhaps, are the exorcism ritual of

the *zar* which opens the play with a prophecy of the exit of one king, and the parallel *subu'* ritual, which announces the arrival of another. There is also the visually potent royal tent, topped with a huge crown, which symbolically moves in Part Two from the right to the centre of the stage, indicating a political shift from monarchies to liberal democracies and condemning both (Wannus is a leftist). The tent finally acquires a life of its own; in the last scene it heaves and contracts like a huge bloody womb, expanding all the time, and then advances mechanically, hugging the throne, to ruthlessly crush the rebellious chorus. In this impressive theatrical gesture Munir sums up visually the message of the play.

His major contribution, however, was making the play into a quasi-musical; politically explosive lyrics were given to the chorus with popular singer Mohamed Munir in the lead. Mohamed Munir is of course the star attraction and his presence in the show accounts for a substantial portion of the audience, especially young people. But he is one in a star-studded cast: the magnificent Tawfiq Abdel-Hamid and famous comedian Ahmed Bedir lead as the two kings, while the beautiful Fayza Kamal and vivacious Hayat El-Sheemi double as members of the chorus and the false king's wife and daughter. Lutfi Labib also bubbles with humour and mischief nightly, giving a zany performance as the servant and the artificial vizier. With a cast like this and an excellent text and production, no wonder the extremely rare full-house sign is currently a fixed feature of the box-office at El-Salam theatre.

The Ruins of Paradise:*
Historical Miniatures

After nearly seven months of rehearsals, director Isam El-Sayed's production of *Munamnamat Tarikhiyyah* (Historical Miniatures), by the great Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannus, has finally opened at the National. With so much time invested in the launching, no wonder it came as a perfectly finished product, meticulously orchestrated and elegantly turned out.

Indeed, it has been many years since the National has given us a work worthy of its history and name – a work of such intellectual toughness, political stamina and artistic complexity. On the opening night, the sense of exhilaration, which has been building up during the final dress rehearsals (open to the critics), burst into full bloom, infecting all present. The production, however, has already aroused, and is bound to continue to generate a lot of heated controversy regarding its thought-content, its reading of history, and its political orientation vis a vis the current Arab-Israeli peace accords and negotiations.

This is due to the nature of the text itself; its complex structure of multiple perspectives makes it inherently resistant to any simplistic, one-sided, black-and-white interpretation. Throughout, the minds of the audience and their sympathies are constantly challenged and forcefully prevented from settling down in any one direction or forming a single point of view on the dramatic proceedings. The tumultuous events of

---

* 6 April 1995.

the seven months the play spans before the sack of Damascus at the hands of Timur Lenk (Tamelane) and his Tatar horde in 1400-1401 (803 H.) are constructed into a dizzying, fast-paced narrative that moves along several trajectories at once, presenting us with a variety of conflicting responses and attitudes to the crisis.

The consciousness of the play – its intellectual focus – does not reside in any one locus on stage; rather, it is intricately spread across several characters, and the impact is one of a complex, polyphonic choral piece. The authorial voice itself is only discernible in the thematic-dramatic interplay of voices as each asserts its validity and credibility in relation to the equally vociforous others. The effect of this dramatic strategy is ultimately one of spatial refraction rather than temporal progression; it is as if the characters, despite the relentless march of the events towards the inevitable, tragic climax, are trapped in a treacherous world of shifting grounds and conflicting fictions. The thrust of the narrative, to put it another way, is intrinsically *deconstructive*: it does not seek to build a story with a moral, nor to recreate a telling and painful historical experience; what it does attempt to do is to subject the Arab mind to a tough and far-reaching analysis, exposing and questioning its undialectical bent, its deeply-entrenched, tyrannical absolutism, and its obstinate intolerance of relativity and difference. The analysis explodes many of the basic assumptions that have governed and regulated the march of Arab history over many centuries – whether in the fields of politics, commerce, religion, ethics or intellectual investigation — and yields one of the most intense, uncompromisingly honest and dramatically powerful metaphors in the history of Arab theatre: the image of the mind crucified and blazing high above the burning, desecrated city at the end of the play.

Choosing as his launching-pad Ibn Iyas's history of Egypt, pompously entitled *Badai' Al-Zuhour fi Waqai' Al-Umur (Lovely Flowers Culled From the Events of Past Times)* – a flagrant misnomer since the events he narrates are mostly gory, blood-curdling and far from 'lovely', Wannus proceeds to put Ibn Iyas himself on stage in the figure of narrator, parodying his style and the rhythms of his thinking and writing most delightfully. By way of a foil, he drags into his dramatic web a historical counterpoint in the figure of Ibn Khaldoun – the renowned philosopher of history and sociologist. But despite the blatantly obvious difference in method, style and outlook between the two historians – one is a bland and passive recorder and official mouthpiece, and the other a worldly-wise, Machiavellian scientist and researcher — the two share a remarkably passionless sense of detachment.

Historically, both were alive and well during the sack of Damascus. The former, the diligently nitpicking Ibn Iyas who did his officious best to defend the savage atrocities of his sultan – Farag Ibn Barquq – towards his political opponents, was denied the dubious honour of joining the sultan's campaign to fend the Tatar horde off Damascus. The latter, Ibn Khaldoun, on the other hand, was destined not only to witness the wanton destruction of the old city and the tragic burning of its ancient mosque, but also to sojourn some seven weeks at Timur's camp, lecturing the royal butcher on his *Muqaddimah* (Introduction to History, 1375-1379), his newly-founded science of culture ('Ilm Al-'Umran), his pet concept of *'Asabiyah* (social cohesion), and providing him with a painstakingly accurate blue-print for his prospective foray into North Africa. Luckily for Ibn Khaldoun, the whole affair remained purely speculative.

As detached observers, the two historians act as chorus, providing a cool, running commentary on the turbulent events, thus helping us to keep them at a sufficiently safe emotional distance. At one point, however, Ibn Khaldoun seems momentarily to succumb to the pressure of human suffering and his philosophical wisdom, his unrelenting scientific determinism and his confident cyclic view of history undergo a severe test. For a fleeting second, we are plunged into the depths of a terrible tragic vision, and the momentary recognition of the utter indifference of history to man is almost unbearable.

Wisely, in an inspired *coup de theatre*, director Isam El-Sayed assigned the roles of the two historians to one actor and Hamza El-Sheemi as both Ibn Iyas and Ibn Khaldoun gave the performance of a lifetime. With stunning economy of tone and gesture, he combined the salient features of both characters in a rare theatrical illustration of the archetypal philiosophical buffoon.

El-Sheemi's slightly clownish air of detachment, his faintly strutting gait and studied elegance contrasted beautifully with the impassioned earnestness of both Mohamed El-Sab' (as the martyr and religious leader) and Ahmed Abdel Warith (as the leader of the garrison defending the city) on the one hand, and with the flagrantly caricaturist style of Abdel-Rahman Abu Zahra (the representative of the city's wealthy, mercantile class) and the marionette-like trio of *'Ulama'* (theologians) on the other. But however much the style of acting may differ, what ultimately unites all those leaders and city notables is, curiously, their honesty. Like Brutus and his clan, they are all honest men; each pursues his course with single-minded tenacity and conviction, and each recreates God in his own image.

What Wannus audaciously questions in the play is not their honesty, but their blind singleness of purpose. To the younger generation of the city, those worthies are no better than the Tatar invaders, and no wonder: the young refugee from Aleppo is bought and raped by the merchant for a handful of gold paid to her destitute father; the city poor constantly bear the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and the insolence of office; the humble, struggling silk-weaver, Marwan, is robbed in broad daylight by the defending army and consoled with empty heroics; a young student is savagely beaten, thrown into prison and finally crucified for his views but not before his books are made into a lovely bonfire in the middle of the city's ancient mosque; the young women of the city are made the victims of an incessant stream of superstitions and the dungeons of the military fortress creak and groan with their load of political dissidents.

The tragic sense of alienation experienced by the young and downtrodden of this evil city reaches its dramatic climax at the end of the play in the suicide of So'ad, the one intellectual female of the play. Faced with the collapse of all the life-supporting codes and systems and the indifference of the heavens, she opts out in a brave gesture of rejection and defiance. She dies in a blaze of glory, having scored her one little triumph against the fates by marrying the man she loves for one night. Her bridal gown becomes her shroud; but the inherent sentimentality of the situation is countered and balanced by the dignity of the writing and the shockingly iconoclastic nature of the option. Given the corruption of the city, its irreparably degenerate collective mind and the eternal vicious cycle of history envisioned by Ibn Khaldoun, the spectator is left with no choice but to admit that So'ad's option is perhaps the only road to freedom.

The grim honesty of Wannus's investigation of Arab history and the Arab mind makes *Miniatures* a deeply pessimistic play. The gloom is only relieved by the exceptional elegance and beauty of El-Sayed's production. It would be difficult to tolerate otherwise; and, indeed, some critics have found it, despite the many distancing epic devices, the hilarious theological trio, Abu Zahra's comical efforts and his many strip-cartoon sequences, a bit heavy on the digestion.

Ashraf Na'im's ingenious set of sliding panels and screens was highly functional and eloquently significant. Moving across a painted backdrop that gave a dual view of the interior and exterior of the Ommayad mosque in Damascus, they could be manoeuvred by the actors into innumerable positions to represent different locations. A substantial reduction of props was an obvious dividend, plus greater fluidity and a galloping rhythm. The panels also had the added virtue of semi-transparency. Lighted from a particular angle, they allowed Esam El-Sayed free-play with silhouettes and this chiaroscuro effect, apart from its aesthetic value, had the emotional effect of rendering the characters at once more distant and more pathetic. To further enhance the dramatic versatility of his panels, Ashraf Na'im, who really surpassed himself on this occasion, had them decorated with a familiar style of Arabic calligraphy; the beautifully carved letters, however, stared at us blankly and vapidly, refusing to yield legible words. Not a single word could be deciphered on any of the eight panels that stretched from the flies to the floor of the stage. Gradually, those panels came to resemble faint and frayed pages out of an old historical manuscript. The fact that they did not make any sense deepened our feeling of the tragic hopelessness which enveloped the characters.

To the front of the stage, stretching across the whole of the proscenium arch, Na'im fitted two movable screens of relative transparency: one was used to project slides illustrating scenes from the narrative in the quaint, oriental style of the early 19th century illustrated history books; the other served mainly as a distancing device to suggest a hazy vision. The impression of haziness, the illustrations and panels combined to deepen the elegiac mood of the play. The fact that it reflects on the present did little to alleviate the sorrow. Only the magnificent talents of the actors could give us some solace.

That Time of Year:*

Drunken Days

I was not in the brightest frame of mind when I made my way to the Book Fair last week to take part in two symposia, one on the future of the Egyptian theatre and the other on the position of women in the contemporary world viewed from a feminist angle. The trip across town at the height of the rush hour – 2 p.m. – in a rickety, grunting taxi amidst all the noise and fumes seemed a cruel conspiracy against my already very jagged nerves. For weeks I had been battling against a tidal wave of depression and spiritual fatigue brought on by a series of internal landslides. My daughter moving out to set up home elsewhere proved a traumatic experience. I had not realized how our lives had become intermeshed and how much I depended on her as a friend and companion. For years we have gadded around town in her little car, ferreting out exciting out-of-the-way shows or sitting through dreary and dull ones that rambled on for over four hours. Her witty remarks and funny comments helped me through many a miserable performance, and afterwards, our little cafe and a lively exchange of views and impressions – a profound dialogue between sensibilities and generations. Theatre is a collective experience both in the making and consumption, and I have always found that sharing a performance with a kindred mind makes one's reception sharper, more sensitive and perceptive. Perhaps fairer as well.

The second landslide happened soon after. On the last day of Ramadan, Ali El-Ra'i, the critic who revolutionized theatre criticism in

* December 1999.

the sixties, shifting the focus from the literary text to the performance and performers, and reshaped the artistic sensibility and approach to theatre of generations of critics and artists, died. Oddly, the following day, I heard that the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski – another man whose theories have had a seminal influence on the Egyptian theatre since the late eighties, and who also foregrounded the performer – had decided, as if by assignation, to join El-Ra'i on his voyage to explore what one French writer called *le grand peut-etre*. It felt like the end of an era.

In one sense, the history of the Egyptian theatre from the sixties onwards can be read as a dialectical movement between the ideas of the two men. In his *Improvisational Comedy* and other books, El-Ra'i put forward the concept of a popular theatre which gives room for the actors to exercise their creativity and power of invention and engage the masses in an active, participationary experience closely linked with their daily reality. The translation of Grotowski's book, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, on the other hand, swung the pendulum in the opposite direction, in favour of an exclusive kind of theatrical experience, based on long and arduous spiritual and physical training on the part of the actors, and involving a small audience prepared to take psychological risks, "cross our frontiers, exceed our limitations," as Grotowski puts it: a theatre where the actor "is a high priest who creates the dramatic liturgy and, at the same time, guides the audience into the experience."

Towards a Poor Theatre was an inspiration to many young theatre artists in Egypt and parts of the Arab world and triggered a spate of experiments and theatre workshops. Even when it was not fully understood or superficially applied, it helped draw attention to the

importance of the actor's body, its expressive power and plastic potential for shaping space. For the young groups with a heritage of a theatrical tradition which is word-oriented, and in a culture which still regards the body with great suspicion, even fear, it was exhilarating to investigate the physical as well as the vocal aspects of performance. And with their very meagre financial resources, how could they resist the idea that theatre could exist without make-up, costumes, sets, lighting, a stage even, or sound effects? That very few artists in Egypt can give the time and dedication Grotowski's Poor Theatre requires remains the biggest obstacle that still faces its advocates in Egypt. There are also all the cultural and psychological taboos, especially in the case of female performers.

I had hardly recovered from my sorrow over El-Ra'i's death when I heard of the death first of Fathi Ghanem, then, at close heels, of Lutfi El-Kholi. Ghanem's dramatic novel, *The Man Who Lost His Shadow*, where the story is narrated from different points of view, had convinced me in the sixties of the relativity of truth and the partial fictionality of all accounts of it. For me and my generation it was a revelation and has left an indelible impression on the imagination. El-Kholi, though mainly a political thinker and writer, had played an active part in the theatre of the sixties and I remember bumping into him often at El-Hakim Theatre, in Emadeddin street, at the time we were putting on a student show of Shakespeare's plays. In those days, theatre was regarded as an effective political forum and taken very seriously. El-Kholi wrote three plays for it: *Kings Cafe* (Kahwat al-Muluk); *The Lawsuit* (Al-Qadiyyah); and *The Rabbits* (Al-Aranib). All were comedies in the tradition of socialist realism, projecting ordinary scenes and characters from daily life in an

exaggerated, sometimes farcical manner, and using them as a vehicle for the writer's progressive socialist ideas. *The Rabbits*, in which a husband and wife exchange roles and sexual identities, was his most adventurous and hilarious and is, perhaps, the earliest feminist play in the Egyptian theatre.

I remembered El-Kholi and his *Rabbits* during the symposium on women's position at the Book Fair. It turned out that despite all the profound insights put across by the panel of speakers and all the serious issues they raised, what preoccupied the majority of the audience was the veil. Secondary was the right of women to work. And when one of the speakers, the Jordanian poetess Zulaykha Abu Risha, dared question the interpretation of a popular Islamic preacher of a verse of the Quran she was nearly physically attacked and the meeting broke up in a near riot. I flew out, feeling that my world lay around me in ruins, like Shakespeare's "Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." The sweet birds have been departing one after the other and those who remain are becoming a sad minority.

That night, I braved the cold and took a cab to El-Salam theatre. There, a bunch of wonderful actors were playing Sa'dallah Wannus's swan song, *Drunken Days* (Al-Ayyam Al-Makhmourah), orchestrated by director Murad Munir. The vivid theatricality, poetic power, and dauntless audacity of the text seem all the more stunning in view of the fact that Wannus wrote it in the final stage of his battle with cancer, practically on his death bed. Like *The Rites of Signs and changes*, written three years earlier (1994), it is a staunchily feminist play which ruthlessly exposes the repression of women in the Arab world and their mental and physical abuse in patriarchal societies.

The heroine, Sanaa, is married off, or rather bartered, by her family at the age of 15 to a rich merchant who nightly rapes her in a gruesome ritual. At 37, with four grown sons and daughters, she falls passionately in love with a christian widower and after an agonizing conflict elopes with him. Her decision is not prompted by love alone, but also by an overpowering desire to act of her own free will at least once in her life – as she tells her youngest daughter. The different attitudes and reactions of her family to the scandal and the individual fates of its members build up a panoramic image of a sick society, deeply riddled with moral, political and ideological contradictions. In such a society, healthy, robust passions cannot survive: Sanaa's love story ends in tragedy, with her eldest son shooting himself in frustration after failing to bring himself to shoot her "and wipe away the shame she has brought on the family," and her lover, Habib, wanting to "devour" her completely – even possess her past and memories, and building up a wall around the house, making it into "another prison" like the one she has left.

Equally intriguing as its subject is the play's structure. The story is given to us through a narrator – Sanaa's grandson – who, in a series of interviews with the surviving members of the family, tries to ferret out its details and piece them together. The interviews, which happened in the past, are enacted before us in the present, and the memories they yield are often likewise enacted. Other scenes, particularly those representing Sanaa's relationship with her lover, are described by the narrator and a chorus of clowns, as imaginative efforts to fill in the gaps in the narrative. The distance created by this technique between the

story and the audience allows a space for reflection (which is what Wannus, deeply influenced by Brecht, always wanted in his theatre), and saves the play from the pitfalls of sensationalism and melodrama.

In Murad Munir's production (first presented at Al-Hanager last year then transferred to El-Salam with new sets and minor changes in the cast), both the lyricism and theatricality of the text were highlighted. A large dose of music, drawn mostly from old songs and popular tunes played live on the lute and piano by the narrator, Wa'el Sami, was added. It contributed to the smooth transition from scene to scene, setting the emotional tone for each, and efficiently filling up the time required by the many set changes. I would have prefered a less cluttered stage, fewer painted drops and props, a more studied choice of costumes, and a less exuberant choreography. But there was plenty of good and sensitive acting in really demanding parts, and not just from the leading actors – Sumayya El-Alfi, Khalid El-Sawi and Attiya Oweis – but also from a promising crop of young performers, some of whom are making their stage debut in this production. There was also the text, shocking and liberating, and practically uncut: a credit to our censor and the best antidote to depression.

A Hair-'razing' Adventure:*

The Head of Mameluke Jaber

Whoever said (perhaps Bertrand Russell, or Wittgenstein, or some other advocate of logical positivism) that we generally think in metaphors, which accounts for a lot of the absurdities, incongruities and contradictions in human thought, and that this confusion is further confounded by an inveterate human habit of waywardly mixing metaphors, was absolutely right. In this respect, one particularly irritating example is the metaphor of "heavy industry" when used in connection with the theatre. I am not quite sure who first thought it up, but I first heard it from veteran director Sa'd Ardash in the course of a symposium on the future (very bleak indeed if you believe him) of the Egyptian theatre.

I am used to Ardash's and his generation's nostalgic, puffed up glorification of the (excessively overrated?) achievements of the past and to their supercilious, sententious, and often tendentious denigration of the present; but I remember blinking very hard when I heard him describe the National theatre as "the forte of heavy industry;" that was new. I pictured the National — the old, fragile building down in Ataba square, with its graceful Islamic architecture — then the ugly, utilitarian complex of steel and iron factories in Hilwan, the most familiar forte of heavy industry to Cairenes (its emissions mix with the air they daily breathe) and therefore the handiest to the imagination, and tried to reconcile the two images. I failed dismally. The stumbling block was

* 9 March 2000.

the actors: I simply could not imagine them as factory hands or machines. When I asked Ardash afterwards what he meant, he waved his hand vaguely, drawing a circle in the air and murmured something about the classics, serious drama, the repertoire system, the present management's abject dereliction of duty and betrayal of its sacred mission. I squinted. Still grappling with the metaphor of the industrial forte, I was now asked to consider that of a holy temple or a crusade!

Ardash's censure is frequently echoed, in various pitches, by critics and artists of the old guard and has recently erupted in a fierce, vituperative, choral denunciation of the National's current revival of Sa'dallah Wannus's *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber's Head* (1969), retitled *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber*. This time, the quarrel is not over the choice of play: Wannus's piece, though experimental at the time it was written, is now a popular classic of the modern Arab theatre and the most frequently revived of the 1960s dramatic heritage. Wannus is also universally acknowledged as one of the greatest, most intellectually daring and artistically innovative Arab dramatists. His premature death of cancer in May 1997 at the age of 56, and his heroic struggle to continue writing till the end have enhanced his prestige and popularity almost to the point of canonization. Besides, *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber's Head* belongs to Wannus's middle, pronouncedly socialist and politically committed period and is, therefore, right up Ardash's and his generation's street; it is also very much in line and tune with the resurgent taste for obstreperous political declamation and heavy-fisted didacticism (of the kind promoted by Mohamed Subhi in his Theatre for All project), as well as the pervasive critical mood which dismisses as inane and frivolous anything which does not vociferously blazon its moral or political message.

In this respect, Murad Munir's new stage-version of *Jaber's Head* at the National does not fall short; the message is there, loud and clear, shouted from the stage, the boxes on both its sides, the back of the auditorium and its front; it is further underlined by Sayed Hijab's lyrics which clinch every scene and by the comments of the narrator or *hakawati* (story-teller) who connects the scenes. The new adaptation left the main action – the story of Jaber – substantially unchanged, restricting its alterations to the outer framework. Writing in his favourite form, that of the-play-within-the-play, and adopting Brecht's alienation principle and its techniques, cherished by the 1960s generation of leftwing writers, Wannus presents the tragic adventure of Jaber (which he lifted out of an ancient history book by Al-Dinari) as a series of scenes conjured up from the past by a story-teller in a humble cafe, and physically enacted before the audience (the one on the stage, in the fictional cafe, and the one in the auditorium at any performance).

The cafe audience constantly intrude upon the scenes with their comments, betting on the future course of events, comparing their lot with that of the common people of Baghdad in the story, and establishing pointed parallelisms. They complain that the *hakawati* has been feeding them nothing but tales of misery and oppression, corruption and famine, as if they haven't enough of that in real life; what they ache and clamour for is an escape route from the present, wish-fulfilment and vicarious satisfaction through stories of heroic exploits, serendipitous adventures, and miraculous changes of fortune. In response, the *hakawati* darkly tells them that the time for happy stories has not arrived yet, that it is up to them to make it arrive, and

that it all depends on what they can read in his sad stories and the kind of moral they draw from them.

The moral couched in the parable of Jaber, a reckless and crafty slave to the vizier of Baghdad at some unspecified point in history, is obvious enough and quite familiar in the 1960s leftwing drama. It simply says that the quest for individual salvation is always fruitless and doomed to end in tragedy and disaster. When a deadly power struggle develops between the Khalif of Baghdad and his vizier, disrupting the life of ordinary people and causing great suffering, the Khalif puts his guards at the city gates to intercept a suspected message from the vizier asking for foreign help. Everyone going out is thoroughly and minutely searched. The vizier is desperate and at his wits' end and Jaber sees his chance and seizes it. The prospect of freedom, fortune, high rank and marriage to his beloved whets his already sharp intelligence and he comes up with a devilishly ingenious stratagem.

The only way to sneak out the message is to have it written on his scalp after it is shaved bald, then let the hair grow back again to cover it. The guards may search everything, even the food and private parts of a person, but it would never occur to them to search under the hair, he tells the vizier. When the shaving ceremony, performed like a mock-religious ritual, is over and the message duly inscribed on the silky smooth scalp, the wily vizier adds a postscript instructing his ally, the king of Persia, to destroy the evidence of their collusion and cut off the precious head. From that moment on, and unbeknown to him, the smugly confident and self-congratulating Jaber walks with his death sentence literally written on his head and this turns everything he says

or does into a cruel irony. But if you do not already know the story, have not read the play, and are watching it for the first time, you do not get to know about the postscript till the end; but though you miss out on the irony, the thrill of the final shocking revelation is more than enough compensation.

It is only after Jaber is beheaded in a savage scene that the *hakawati* reveals the secret of his death and picks up the narrative thread to describe the terrible sack of Baghdad and the horrible endless night into which it has plunged. From that pitiless night, the citizens of Baghdad, Jaber's contemporaries, address the cafe audience across the chasm of centuries and warn them of a similar fate unless they wake up, shed their fear and indifference, become politically active and involved, and take their destiny into their own hands. The lesson, however, falls on deaf ears and the play ends on a cynical note with the cafe regulars threatening to boycott it if the *hakawati* persists in telling them such gruesome tales.

In Murad Munir's current production, the initial cafe setting is dismissed and the traditional, old-fashioned *hakawati* is replaced by the fair and voluptuous Fayza Kamal in a wine-coloured trim jacket and skin-tight black trousers. Acting like an impresario or master of revels, she welcomes us, pays tribute to former masters and introduces the evening's entertainment. When she launches into her narrative, hitched up high in the *loge* on the right, facing a small band and a singer on the left, she assumes the tone of voice and intonation of female presenters of children's programmes on the box. The suggestion of a children's game gains force as she announces that, rather than a stage, as Shakespeare (and Yusef Wahbi after him) would have it, the world is

really a marionette show. In any case, the performance proceeds as one: actors hang from the flies on strings like marionettes, climb up toy-like high towers, hide behind cartoon-like columns, bounce up and down on beds, or gleefully sway on brightly coloured swings. The sets have the vividness, simplicity and boldness of children's drawings, and Munir's renowned passion for visual exuberance and kinetic effervescence is fully indulged.

The sprightly mood which informs the new frame extends to the inner action, pervading many scenes and infecting the style of acting, particularly in the case of Ahmed Bedeir who plays Jaber. Wannus's serious message is still there, very much so, but Munir and his actors do not see why they should not have as much fun, and give as much pleasure as they can delivering it. It is perhaps this spirit of fun, the rejection of pompous gravity and glum solemnity, which has led many of the critics who can only think of the serious in terms of the lugubrious to accuse the production of levity and frivolousness. This does not mean that the production is one long frisky romp or a round of unadulterated merriment. There are sad, moving scenes, and the most poignant are the ones which subtly evoke, without the least direct reference, the tragic suffering of the Iraqi people.

Other targets for critical attacks were the alterations made by Munir in the parts framing the central story and his choice of popular singer Hassan El-Asmar (the contemporary extension of Ahmed Adaweyah who flourished in the 1970s, and Shukuku before him) as commentator. But in making his alterations, Munir was in fact obeying Wannus's own instructions in his introduction to the printed text which he insists is not a play but, in his own words, "a work-project" to be

completed by the director and his cast through improvisation. He explicitly states that the initial cafe-setting and frame-scenes are not mandatory and can, indeed should, be altered to suit the time, place and specific conditions of every production; even the dialogue should be changed into the dialect of the place of performance. Munir who knows and loves his Wannus well (he did *The King is the King* and *Drunken Days* in the 1990s) has actually done nothing but obey the author's instructions. As for the choice of El-Asmar which was described as "beneath the National," I think that Wannus would have been the first to approve it, if only to spite the smug, bourgeois critics. Admittedly, El-Asmar's songs occupied more space than they should have, and his coarse, unpolished voice may not appeal to refined ears; but to contemptuously dismiss him as "unfit to tread the boards of the National" is nothing short of rank snobbery. The National's director, Huda Wasfi, ought to be congratulated indeed for turning a deaf ear to such stuffy criticism and for treating the National for what it is: a playhouse and not a school, a temple, or, indeed, a forte of heavy industry.

The Time is Out of Joint:*

A Day of Our Times

When I heard that director Amr Dawwarh was rehearsing Sa'dallah Wannus's *A Day of Our Times* at Al-Ghad theatre I was thrilled. At last the lovers of Wannus's work were going to see this ferocious, deliciously outrageous satire on the mores and morals of our times in a live performance. It was too good to be true. When Wannus wrote this play in 1993, he couldn't get it published anywhere in Syria, and though it appeared a year later in the Egyptian literary periodical *Adab wa Naqd* (Literature and Criticism) and in the Lebanese *Al-Adaab* (The Arts) magazine in 1995, before it was printed in 1996 in his collected works, there has been only one production of it so far, by a Jordanian fringe troupe, if I remember correctly, which I saw during the CIFET (the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre) some years ago. Apart from that, I know of no professional Arab director in mainstream theatre who dared to touch it before Dawwarah embarked on his current production.

This is not surprising in countries where freedom of expression is severely curtailed and public performances are heavily censored. *A Day of Our Times* is simply too verbally audacious, too shockingly outspoken. In five scenes, which take the form of violent confrontations, punctuated with narrative passages and comments by the author in a voice-over, Wannus traces the progress, or, rather, plummeting of his hero from innocence to experience, from blissful

* 7 August 2003.

ignorance to a terrible awakening and from hope to the depths of despair. Farouk, an idealistic, happily-married, mathematics teacher at a girls secondary school in a small town, discovers one morning, through a brawl in his classroom, that some of the girls, all of them from respectable families, with fathers in high office, frequent a chic, cunningly camouflaged brothel run by a wealthy, beautiful woman called El-Sit Fadwa. Shocked and horrified, he questions the girls but is brazenly told to mind his own business. When he appeals to the headmaster to open an investigation, he finds him busy trying to track down the culprit who has scribbled offensive political graffetti against the head of the regime all over the walls of the school toilets. This is a far more serious offence, he is told, since loyalty to the regime is "the mother of virtues" and to ensure it is the major task of the school. Moreover, he is roundly admonished for speaking ill of "El-Sit Fadwa" who is praised by the headmaster as an unpright citizen and generous benefactress.

Not heeding the headmaster's direct warning not to meddle in this business and his veiled threats, Farouk resorts to the mosque in the next scene to seek the help of its Imam and preacher, El-Sheikh Metwally. He finds him recording his daily radio *Fatawi* programme and listens to his pompous, scatological drivel about the ideal Islamic toilet practice – a perfect parody of such programmes. When innocent, pious Farouk broaches the subject and asks for advice, he is severely rebuked for not attending the Friday lessons, then treated to a long, impassioned harangue denouncing all schools and secular education in general as useless, prenicious and the work of infidels and the devil, and, finally, harshly censured for slandering a pious and charitable lady like "El-Sit Fadwa" who donates generously to the mosque. No where in Arab

drama can you find such savage lampooning of religious teachers and preachers as you get in this portrait of the venal, hypocritical, bigoted and thoroughly obscene Sheikh.

When Farouk, now totally confused and dazed, decides to inform the father of one of the girls, who happens to be the governor of the province, he is subjected once more to a lecture, this time about the virtues of crass materialism, the new market ethos and the need for moral resilience and ethical flexibility. To illustrate his point, the governor cites the example of one of his employees who after years of loyal service suddenly went berserk, hurled obscenities at all his bosses, then stripped naked and peed on everybody in sight. Though we never see this poor civil servant who was driven mad by years of silently watching rampant corruption, or, according to the governor, by his failure to adapt and move with the times, he is so vividly evoked by Wannus that his grotesque, pathetic image acts as an ironically bitter emblem for the whole play. When Farouk finally manages to blurt out his information, asking the father if he knew that his daughter was a regular visitor at the notorious house, the father retorts breezily, but quite maliciously too: "Of course. It is where she met your wife and made friends with her. Your wife is very popular there and El-Sit Fadwa is very fond of her and pampers her. You are a very lucky man."

The fourth scene inevitably carries the devastated mathematician to the sorceress's enchanting, mirror-lined den to verify the truth about his wife. Finally we get to meet El-Sit Fadwa we have been hearing so much about and by the end of the scene Wannus has built her into a metaphor for life, with all its paradoxes and contradictions, pleasures,

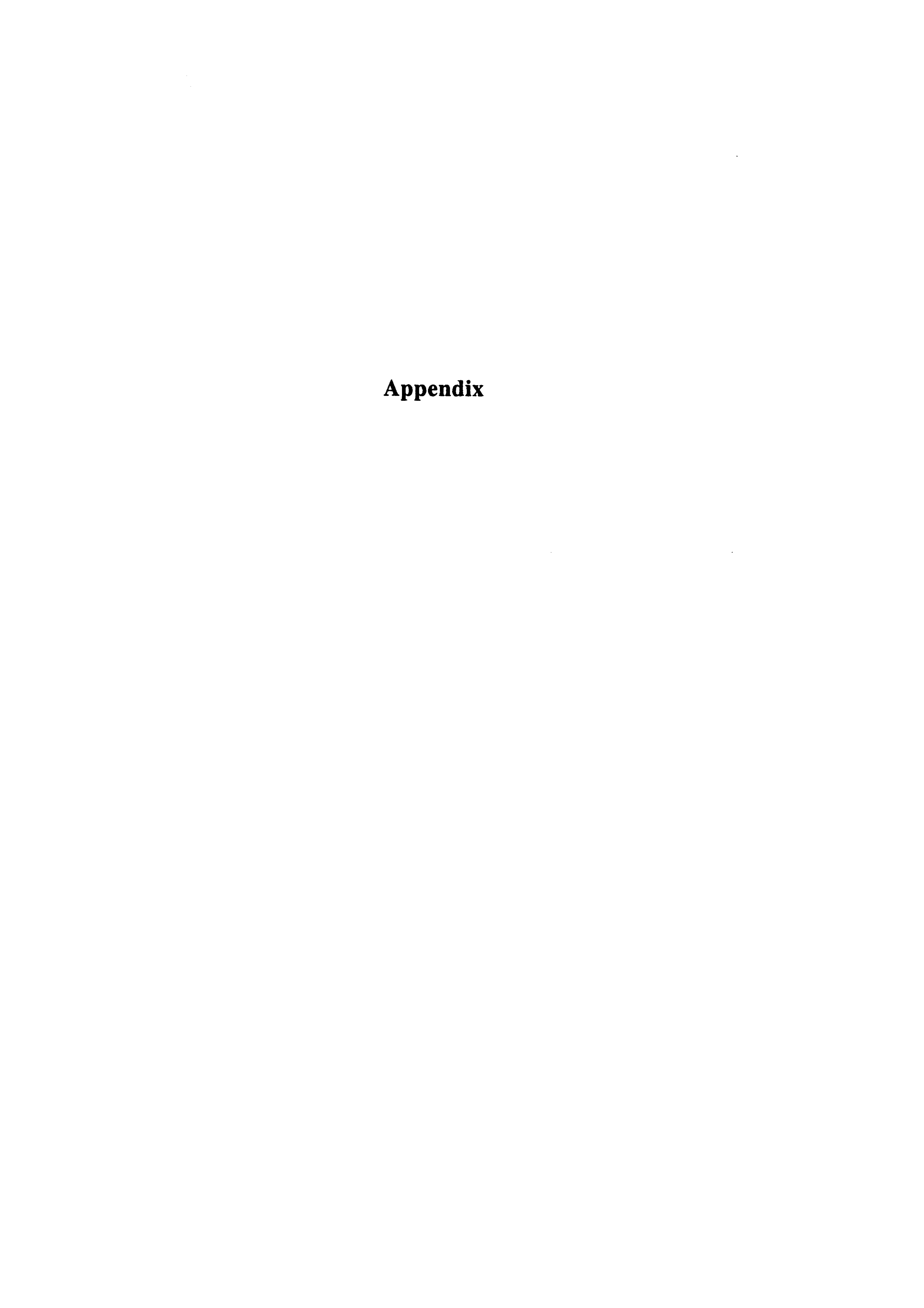
sorrows, and lethal temptations. Though he resists her seduction, the poor school-teacher is unable to condemn her and this adds to his confusion. He rushes home not to avenge his honour but to hide from a world in which he feels a complete stranger. He has lost all his anchors in reality; everything he had ever believed in has crumbled and turned to dust. Feeling utterly alone, in a place and a time where he does not belong, as he keeps reiterating, he could find refuge only in death. But he doesn't travel alone; his wife too feels that the world, or El-Sit Fadwa, has seduced her, robbed her of her integrity and reduced her to a tattered rag. The play ends in a suicide pact, with two embracing corpses. Admittedly, this is the stuff of melodrama *par excellence* and Wannus makes no bones about it. The play, however, never comes across as melodramatic. The rage and pain are all too genuine and inform every line; the handling of the scenes and management of the dialogue are imbued with a tough sense of irony, and the verbal texture has the richness and evocative power of poetry, without sacrificing its uncompromising honesty or sardonic humour.

I had been so looking forward to seeing this text in action on the stage. Now that I have seen it, I do not know whether to celebrate or lament, applaud or boo. Though the current production missed out on the element of ritual, deliberately built in scene 4, and was visually drab, the choice of cast, led by Sohair El-Murshidi, in a welcome comeback to the stage after a long absence, is admirable and guarantees good acting. The directorial conception which takes inspiration from the many mirrors lining the walls of El-Sit Fadwa's pleasure dome is quite intelligent and saves on the production costs to boot. Instead of assigning each character in the play an actor, Dawwarah makes El-Murshidi and Mamdouh Darwish play all the negative characters in

the play, with each performing as many as five different parts. El-Murshidi plays the headmaster, the governor's assistant, the radio-broadcaster who interviews Sheikh Metwally (all originally male characters in the text), El-Sit Fadwa, as well as her aged father in the sketch about her former life she enacts before Farouk to convince him that she was as much sinned against as sinning. Darwish plays the school supervisor (a wonan in the text) employed by the regime to spy on both pupils and teachers alike, Sheikh Metwally, the governor, El-Sit Fadwa's *valet de chambre* (originally a maid) and her former, brutal, mercenary husband in the short play-within-the-play. Not only does this allow them plenty of scope to display their technical prowess, it also creates an eerie effect that all the negative forces are distorted reflections of each other, lending conviction to the hero's growing sense of disorientation and of the flimsiness, illusiveness and instability of the world he moves in, despite the very realistic sets. By contrast, Farouk 'Eita and Hanan Metawe' do not double in other parts but remain Farouk, the teacher, and his wife, Nagat, throughout. This endows them with a firm sense of reality, making them seem the only solid presences in a world otherwise populated by shifting appearances, insubstantial shadows, transient reflections and visual fallacies.

No amount of good acting or directing, however, can mend what the censor had hopelessly spoilt – which is the text. At his orders, chunks were hacked, whole scenes (like Sheikh Metwally's radio talk) were completely rewritten and rephrased in a more polite idiom and many words, particularly those that referred to certain organs or parts of the body, were replaced with euphemisms. It was as cruel as pulling out the teeth and fangs of a lion and removing its claws to consign it to the circus ring. The censoring process could not of course affect the

taut, classical structure, very reminiscent of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* — with its single concentrated action, strict unity of time, rising crescendo and tragic recognition leading to a reversal of fortune. Nor could it completely efface the palpable influence of Gean Genet's *Balcony* and *The Maids* in the portrayal of the brothel and the ritual play-acting El-Sit Fadwa practices nightly with her maid — though the production failed to produce the ritualistic aspect of this exercise. Nevertheless it has left us with a tame, docile text that had no bite. The hero's raging against the world and its sinful ways was mostly left intact (he is after all a romantic idealist and does not use offensive words) and so was the final repentance and suicide scene. Should one be grateful for that and go along with the old Egyptian proverb which says "Nus El-'ama walal El-'ama kuluh" (to be half-blind is better that not to see at all)? I for one do not feel particularly grateful.



Appendix

*Women Playwrights in Egypt**

The list of women playwrights in Egypt is depressingly short. When you have counted in everybody, including the one-timers and those who never made it to the stage, and even if you add for a bonus Amina El-Sawi who adapted some novels in the sixties, the number does not exceed a dozen.

Compared to other Arab countries, however, Egypt does not seem to have done too badly in the space of forty years. Besides, if we were to expand our theme and make it "women dramatists in Egypt", we will find that at least six women have tried their hand at television drama. My business here, however, is with women who specifically wrote with the stage in mind.

Recent scholarly research has revealed that in the first half of the 20th Century, actress Dawlat Abyad, who founded a company in her own name in 1944, wrote two plays, *Dawlat* and *Al-Wagib* (Duty) – of which the manuscripts have been lost – and that writer Maï Zeyadah published two short stories in dialogue-form which hardly qualify as plays. In the second half of the 20th Century, the first woman playwright we meet is Sufi Abdallah whose *Sweepstake* was performed in the 1951-52 season. The play, which is not available in either manuscript or print, was a social drama about the trials and tribulations of the poorer classes. Theatre historian Samir Awad remembers it as faintly reminiscent of Gorki's *Lower Depths* and technically unimpressive. There was nothing fresh or challenging about it in either

* Reprinted (with some additions and alterations) from my earlier book, *The Egyptian Theatre: A Diary (1990-1992)*, Cairo, GEBO, 1993.

stagecraft or point of view, he declares; it seems also to have had its fair share of sentimental morality, according to him.

The faults of the play may have been many, but they are the kind that one frequently comes across in first attempts even by men. Criticism, however, traditionally a masculine domain, tends to be particularly niggly and inordiantely censorious when it comes to women. As early as the 17th century, Ephra Behn noted with bitterness this sad fact of literary life. It is a pity that Sufi Abdallah did not possess the stamina of her British counterpart. She never wrote another play and for years afterwards *Sweepstake* remained an oddity.

Sufi's example, however, together with the progressive ideas of the period, inspired other women to repeat the attempt. Saniya Qura'a followed with a group of historical plays. They received little critical notice and their theatrical viability was never tested in performance. Though published, all copies of the book seem to have evaporated; I am still trying to locate one. In the same boat with Qura'a's unstaged, vanished texts are the plays of Nadia Abdel-Hamid which were published in the 1960s. At the moment, no real appreciation of the merit of either writer can be made.

Next, we meet Amina El-Sawi, busy adapting novels for the stage, including Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*. El-Sawi, however, soon deserted the stage; she wore the veil, called herself an "Islamic writer" and devoted her energies to T.V. serialized religious drama. For the next burst of female dramatic activity we have to wait a number of years. And, indeed, it is at once a curious and sobering fact that the decade renowned as the golden age of the Egyptian theatre should have produced only one female director, Layla Abu-Seif (though her major output belongs to the 1970s), and two original plays by women.

In 1968, the avant-garde branch of the National staged Layla Abdel-Baset's one act play *Papers, Papers !* It was to be the beginning of a long and ardous struggle to build up a career as a playwright and win recognition. Unexpectedly, Abdel-Baset's marriage to director Abdel-Ghaffar Ouda did not make it any easier for her. She was silent throughout the seventies, and her total output to date remains very meager. Apart from some television work and a couple of adaptations of foreign plays, she has written only four plays, three of which are in one act, and two are monodramas.

The only other woman writer to make it to the stage in the 1960s was Fathiya El-Assal. Hussein Gom'a directed her *Swing* for the Alexandria National in 1969 and *The Passport* followed in 1972 at El-Gomhoriya theatre. In the eighties, she produced two more plays: *Women Without Masks* was presented at El-Salam theatre, but not before the censor had axed the "women" from the title; *Betwixt and Between*, however failed to get a sponsor and eventually appeared in book-form. Currently, El-Assal is fighting hard to give her latest play. *Women's Prison*, a viewing chance.

With five full-length theatre pieces, countless radio plays, 20 T.V. plays and 22 T.V. drama serials. El-Assal is by far the most prolific woman dramatist in Egypt and the Arab world. She is the only woman too who has made writing her sole profession and source of income. This appears all the more striking when we consider her beginnings. Indeed, she can be said to have had the most inauspicious childhood possible for a future writer.

Born into a family which believed that girls should be kept at home and ignorant, and rigorously coached in the rituals of female obedience, El-Assal never went to school and was denied a home education.

Fortunately, she married journalist and would-be-novelist Abdallah El-Tookhi. Not only did he help her teach herself to read and write, but also coached her in left-wing politics and Marxist philosophy. At the first signs of her literary talent, he encouraged her to write and introduced her in the right circles. Understandably. El-Assal has little patience with the brand of feminism that regards man as the arch enemy.

"I have no quarrel with men," she asserts. "If anything, I am a man-lover," she adds laughing. "My quarrel is with capitalism and the patriarchal ideology and systems it has spawned," she goes on; "these are the forces that oppress both men and women." About the traditional images of women and the gender-specific division of social roles, she says: "some roles are imposed by nature, like child-bearing. I do not mind those, so long as they do not exclude other possible roles. I bore four children myself and enjoyed it. But I also enjoy writing. I would resent it very much if someone tried to stop me writing. But I would resent it equally if someone tried to stop me having children or looking feminine."

Not infrequently, El-Assal's moderate views have made her unpopular with radical feminists. "The feeling is mutual," she confesses. The first time she went to a Marxist meeting she was greeted with a lot of harsh criticism from her female comrades. "I was all dolled up and they were all in jeans and men's shirts, with their sleeves rolled up. I told them I was quite willing for my mind to be improved, but will not have my body tempered with." These women, she maintains, are as had as the Islamic fundamentalists who urge women to obliterate their femininity by wearing the veil. "I fully support the equality of the sexes," she says, "but I also recognize their difference."

In El-Assal's thought and writing, the freedom of the body is deeply linked with the freedom of the mind. The historical confinement of the female body to the home has been, in her view, the main cause of women's intellectual backwardness. "Denied education, social mobility and access to public life, how can women hope to develop their minds, or become artists or scientists?!" she exclaims. In such circumstances, any kind of creative writing becomes difficult, and writing plays becomes will-nigh impossible.

A woman, she explains, can weave novels out of her simple and limited daily experience. Theatre, however, is a communal art and a public forum; it tackles broader issues and requires a public type of discourse, more comprehensive, dialectical, and politically conscious — in other words, the type of discourse women are rarely trained into. Besides, very few women can write good plays without seeing some first; how else could they learn the craft? In most Arab countries, however, including Egypt, theatre-going is still regarded as an almost exclusively male pastime. If women are allowed to go at all, they seldom choose the play themselves or go without a male relative.

No wonder the number of women fiction-writers far exceeds that of women playwrights. For one thing, writing novels does not involve going out, mixing with actors and directors or staying out late at rehearsals. Besides, fiction is better suited to the housewife's daily pattern. Unlike drama, it does not require long periods of uninterrupted concentration and planning. A novelist can interrupt her writing to answer the door, see to the cooking or the baby without substantial damage. For a dramatist, this could prove disastrous. Serialized drama, however, whether for radio or television, is a different matter, she points out. It is closer to fiction and can afford to ramble and digress. It

is, therefore, a form of writing that women can easily accommodate within their daily routine. "I suppose that is why I wrote so many," she adds.

Now that the children are all grown-up and married, El-Assal plans to devote more time to stage-writing. It would be a pity if she didn't. Her long experience in radio and television has given her a sureness of touch and a degree of technical confidence that other women playwrights, with rare exceptions, lack. Her last three plays are more original and experimental in form, and more challenging and daring in their ideas.

The only other woman playwright whose artistic stature matches El-Assal's is Nehad Gad. Sadly her promising career was tragically cut short by cancer after only two stage plays. Both are fine specimens of dramatic writing and evidence a great talent — which makes one regret all the more deeply her untimely death in 1989.

Unlike El-Assal, Gad was a late arrival on the theatrical scene. It took her twenty years to discover the medium best suited to her talent. She was born into an upper middle-class family, the only child of an aging couple. Her father's job as a police commissioner meant frequent moves to new towns, new homes and new schools. Very early on, the little girl discovered that books were the only friends she could carry with her from place to place. By ten, she was a voracious reader, and by twelve, she was writing stories.

Though painful, this lonely childhood brought with it a lot of independence. At 17, Nehad was working as a journalist, writing short stories and children's strip-cartoons, and also reading, first science, then English literature at Cairo University. She made an early, unhappy

marriage which lasted only a few years. Shattered by the experience, she left for the States after the divorce. There, two events happened which significantly influenced her later career. She read for an M.A. degree in drama and met her second husband, playwright Samir Sarhan.

For the next ten years she was in close and almost daily contact with the theatrical world. This gave her the valuable first-hand experience of the stage she needed. Armed with both theoretical and practical knowledge of drama, she felt confident enough to embark on her new career as a professional playwright.

Her first play *Adilah* was a virtuoo piece for one actress. The late Naima Wasfi undertook the part and Zeinab Shumees directed. The production which opened at El-Tali'a theatre in 1981 was indeed an all-women show — written, designed, directed and performed exclusively by women. This pleased Nehad no end.

The production delighted many and dismayed a few. Those disliked the candid image Nehad projected of the frustrated, materialistic and petty-minded middle-class housewife. She was told that she ought to challenge those traditional images of women by presenting different ones. Nehad would listen calmly to such criticism, then shrug her shoulders innocently and say: "I write about life as I see it around me, not as I think it should be." Among friends she would add: "I think what is wrong with women's writing is that they tend to write themselves into their works and idealize a bit. The result is that their heroines are always good, sensitive, and intellectual. I would like to see some of them in real life. If our patriarchal culture can produce such fine specimens, why challenge it then?!"

In this and her next play, *The Bus Stop* (an expanded version of which, renamed *On the Pavement* and directed by Galal El-Sharqawi in 1986, became a smash-hit), Nehad insisted on telling the truth, however painful and unflattering. Nothing annoyed her more than when critics regarded her second heroine, Safiyya, as a symbol of Egypt in the hallowed tradition of the sixties. "I write about real women," she often said, "not about symbols. Safiyya smuggles in a big video machine under her clothes at the airport. I don't think a symbol can do that." Safiyya is a very ordinary Egyptian middle-class woman who gains awareness at the cost of great suffering. She is shown at the beginning uncritically upholding the bourgeois world- view and value-systems and blithely free of any intellectual concerns or pretensions. Her dreams are simply a husband, children, an elegant home and a fat income. The rest of the world can go to hell for all she cares. At the end, however, she realizes that the dreams she was taught to cherish are nothing but traps designed to ensnare unsuspecting females into bondage, humility and exploitation.

Between *Adilah* in 1981 and *On the Pavement* in 1986, Nehad Gad wrote a film-script and called it *Women.* In it, she completely reversed the traditional images of the hero and heroine. She made the hero a negative, idealistic dreamer, and the heroine a positive, down-to-earth realist who sacrifices her moral and professional principles as a lawyer to keep the family going.

After watching the film, I told Nehad jokingly: "If you go on like this, you will soon be called a woman-hater!" She replied: "I am not attacking women, I am simply saying that in societies like ours, many women cannot afford the luxury of ideals. In their daily struggle to ensure the physical survival of the family, they have to be sometimes

ruthless and even unscrupulous realists. Most women spend nearly half their lives cooking, cleaning, washing and nursing the sick. I don't see how they can remain romantic!"

El-Assal's and Gad's tolerant view of the male stands in sharp opposition to Nawal El-Sa'dawi's. In her single play, *Isis*, she goes all out to advocate and affirm the supremacy of the female. The ancient Egyptian goddess here is not a character, but simply a mouthpiece, and a noisy and long-winded one at that. The text is marred by an over abundance of speeches, exhortations and ideological debates.

The central conflict between the authoress, disguised as the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis, and the patriarchal culture, embodied in the evil god, Set, who, according to the pharaonic myth, murders her husband, Osiris, the god of fertility, is represented in terms of white versus black and is depressingly lacking in dramatic complexity. More disconcertingly, it never seems to move or bring about any real change. It does not even move in circles. One cannot here speak of dramatic action. The characers never seem to do anything but yap at each other. To cover up for the lack of dramatic action, El-Sa'dawi treats us to some gory scenes of physical violence, involving murder, rape, female circumcision and two castrations on stage. As the horror piles up, the whole thing becomes ridiculous and vulgarly sensational.

Isis, published in 1986, was never performed and is, perhaps, unperformable – not on account of its structural faults (worse texts have been performed), but on account of its iconoclastic message and radical views. It is precisely this, however, which makes it very exciting reading. Its dauntless questioning and intellectual audacity remain unparalleled in all the writing by Egyptian women.

Roughly of the same generation as El-Sa'dawi, Fawziya Mahran is blissfully free of that brand of aggressive feminism. Reading her *Cabuchi* after El-Sa'dawi's *Isis* is like hearing Chopin after a raucous concert of jungle music. Indeed, the play itself closely resembles an oratorio. The voices of the characters – a bishop, a nun, a young Palestinian couple and their Israeli torturers – are sensitively orchestrated to render the colour and texture of their emotions. To the external conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, Mahran adds a more complex internal one between the peaceful teachings of Christianity and the political necessity of fighting. Both the archbishop of Jerusalem, who gives the play its name, and the nun, Margaret-Martha, are embroiled in this conflict, and their doubts, prayers and self-questioning provide some of the most moving scenes in the play.

The stage-sets Mahran suggests in the published text, as well as many of her stage-directions, reveal her sharp awareness of the multiple languages of theatre and the value of light and pure sound. It is a pity, therefore, that the play was never seen in performance. Her other play *The Statue*, a realistic short piece about the frustrations of a sculptor, was also published in a magazine, and also remains untested on the boards.

The four remaining names on our list of Egyptian women playwrights belong to a younger generation. Nahid-Na'ila Naguib, a trained actress who retired in the seventies, wrote many plays of which only *Two in Bliss* was seen by the public. They are, however, available in print. In the mid eighties, Naguib became engrossed in her career as a professional translator but lately she has resumed writing. Nadia El-Banhawi was luckier with three plays staged so far.

The other two, both poetesses, have so far proved one-timers. Neither Wafa' Wagdi's lyrical *Nissan and the Seven Doors*, nor Fatma Qandeel's more robust and rebellious *Sheherezade* have any sisters. Wagdi, however, has written a lot of poetry since then and won a state award. Qandeel, on the other hand, seems to have vanished into thin air. After the production of her play at the Youth Theatre, she went home to the provinces and no one has heard from her or about her since. She may have been discouraged by the undeservedly modest success of her play and decided to give up, or she could be married and bringing up a horde of children. Whatever the case, the result is that she has been disturbingly silent for years. Her *Sheherazade*, however, still speaks to me and tells me how she never consented to marry the misogynist butcher Shahrayar and how she led a revolution to overthrow him. Her story is good, and I keep wishing for more. But she always says, with a sigh of sorrow, that her creator's voice has dissolved into silence before she could teach her another story.

Index of Directors

رقم الإيداع : ١٤٨٦٢/ ٢٠٠٣
I.S.B.N. 977-01-8830-1

مطابع الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب